

Approaches to Agrippan Scepticism

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I declare that this thesis is all my own work

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'B. Sworn', with a stylized, cursive script.

Benjamin Michael Sworn

‘... (*Write It!*)....’

Elizabeth Bishop, ‘One Art’

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I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Brian Garrett, as well as Adam Henschke and my family, for all their help and encouragement.



## **Abstract**

I begin from the intuitive requirement that a proper explanation of the possibility of empirical knowledge cannot assume any empirical knowledge in order to explain its possibility. But in conjunction with a radical scepticism I call 'the Agrippan problematic' this requirement leads to the ostensibly paradoxical observation that we require empirical knowledge to explain the possibility of empirical knowledge, and yet we cannot assume any empirical knowledge in order explain its possibility. This ostensibly paradoxical observation is at the heart of that problematic.

That observation is paradoxical, and not a straight contradiction, in virtue of how the Agrippan sceptic argues. But we should say that it is ostensibly paradoxical because the challenge to the epistemologist is to show why it is not paradoxical. To that end I delineate four applications of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic in regards to four epistemic loci I identify within the traditional notion of a justification or warrant for a belief. The most prominent of those epistemic loci is that of a justification itself, and in application to that locus the argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic is commonly known as 'the epistemic regress argument'. I suggest that a formally sufficient answer to that argument should also enable an answer to the other three applications of the Agrippan sceptic's argumentative methodology.

There are various responses in the literature to the epistemic regress argument, however I focus on three. They are: 'foundationalism', 'coherentism', and finally the epistemology of Wilfrid Sellars. Each in a different way questions the premise of the epistemic regress argument. That premise is that all justification must be inferential. I identify two assumptions which underlie that premise: firstly, that the only way in which a belief can justify another belief is inferentially; and secondly, that a justification for some proposition must always be epistemically distinct from a belief in that proposition.

The foundationalist questions that second assumption, essentially claiming that certain beliefs can justify themselves. However, I argue that we simply cannot make intelligible sense of the idea that a belief can justify itself except in certain specific cases. The coherentist questions neither assumption, instead suggesting that the Agrippan sceptic assumes that inferential justification is linear. However, I argue that the coherentist's position is a holistic foundationalism, and suffers from the same defects as that other position. Sellars, however, questions that first assumption, arguing

that a belief can justify another belief without being inferentially connected to it. I argue that Sellars's epistemology may be taken to have the resources to illustrate that ostensibly paradoxical observation to be just that—ostensibly paradoxical.

## **Table of Contents**

Introduction	P.1
Chapter One: Knowledge and Scepticism	P.9
—Introduction	P.9
—§1.1. Knowledge and Justification	P.9
—§1.2. Scepticism and Radical Scepticism	P.15
Chapter Two: The Agrippan Problematic	P.22
—Introduction	P.22
—§2.1. The Agrippan Problematic I: The Epistemic Regress Argument	P.23
—§2.2. The Agrippan Problematic II: The General Argumentative Methodology of the Agrippan Sceptic	P.27
—§2.3. Foundationalism and Coherentism	P.36
—§2.4. The Agrippan Problematic III: The Problem of the Criterion	P.42
Chapter Three: Foundationalism and the Agrippan Problematic	P.47
—Introduction	P.47
—The Evidential Regress Argument and the Appearance Theory	P.48
—The Appearance Theory and Fallibility	P.53
—Bonjour's Argument	P.58
—The Sense-Datum Theory and Sellars's Dilemma	P.63
Chapter Four: From Logical Atomism to the Coherence Theory of Concepts	P.71
—Introduction	P.71
—§4.1. Sellars's Analysis of 'Looks-Talk'	P.71
—§4.2. Three Explanations	P.79
Chapter Five: Coherentism and the Agrippan Problematic	P.83
—Introduction	P.83
—§5.1. Coherentism and the Epistemic Regress Argument	P.83
—§5.2. Coherentism as Foundationalism	P.89
Chapter Six: Sellars and the Agrippan Problematic	P.94
—Introduction	P.94
—§6.1. The Theoretical Introduction of Thoughts	P.95
—§6.2. The Two Criteria of Non-Inferential Knowledge and Reports	P.103
—§6.3. Sellars's Two Hurdles	P.109
—§6.4. Sellars and the Epistemic Regress Argument	P.117

—§6.5. Another Kind of ‘Ought’	P.124
—§6.6. Sellars and the Agrippan Problematic: A Solution	P.129
Conclusion	P.135
Bibliography	P.139

## Introduction

Barry Stroud has written:

The philosophical interest in knowledge is general, and in at least two different ways. We are interested in all of our knowledge of the world taken together, or in some domain characterized in general terms. To ask only how we come to know some things in the domain, given that we already know certain other things in it, is not to ask about all knowledge of that kind in general. And we don't just want a heterogeneous list of ways of coming to know. We want to find a single way, or a small number of very general 'ways of knowing'. To explain how they work will be to explain, in general, how knowledge of the kind in question is possible.<sup>1</sup>

In this thesis I am interested in 'all of our knowledge of the world taken together', i.e., what is normally called 'empirical knowledge'. That is, 'We want to understand how any [empirical] knowledge at all is possible—how anything we currently accept amounts to [empirical] knowledge'.<sup>2</sup> And to limit its purview from the off, in this thesis I am only concerned with the first aspect of the generality demanded by such an explanation as highlighted by Stroud—that aspect which concerns what such an explanation is disbarred from doing, i.e., assuming empirical knowledge in order to explain its possibility. This is to say: my investigation will operate under the methodological dictate that we will have failed to explain how empirical knowledge is possible if we have had to assume empirical knowledge in order to provide that explanation.

How does this limit its purview? I suggest that the two aspects of the generality demanded by what we might call 'the traditional epistemological project', are subject to two different, radically sceptical problematics.<sup>3</sup> Radical scepticism is 'the claim that our beliefs, or our beliefs belonging to some broad category, are never so much as justifiable'.<sup>4</sup> Thus, if we make explicit the implicit connection between the notion of justification and explanation—'To show that [*re explain how*] knowledge is possible is to give ourselves reasons to think [*re to be justified in thinking*] that we are in a position to know things'—then radical scepticism can be understood as the claim that *we cannot explain how empirical knowledge is possible because we cannot be justified in believing*

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Stroud, 'Scepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge', pp. 3—4, in Barry Stroud, *Understanding Human Knowledge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 1—8.

<sup>2</sup> Barry Stroud, 'Understanding Human Knowledge in General', p. 101, in Stroud, *Understanding Human Knowledge*, pp. 99—121.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, p. 47, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). From hence, *UD*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 48.

that we have any empirical knowledge.<sup>5</sup> We may begin by naively asking how empirical knowledge is possible, and noting that only an explanation exhibiting those aspects of generality highlighted above will really be satisfactory in answering such a question, but that question only gets its bite when we encounter arguments to the effect that empirical knowledge is impossible, i.e., when we encounter radical scepticism.

The thought, therefore, that the two aspects of the generality demanded by the traditional epistemological project are subject to two different, radically sceptical problematics, is suggestive of the fact that there are multiple ways in which the radically sceptical claim that we cannot explain how empirical knowledge is possible because we cannot be justified in believing that we have any empirical knowledge can be brought to bear on that project. And, indeed, that is what we find. That aspect of the generality demanded by that project which I shall focus upon is ultimately concerned with the—ostensibly, it must be hoped—paradoxical observation that *we require empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge, and yet we cannot assume any empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge*. I shall call this ‘the Agrippan problematic’. On the other hand, that second aspect of the generality demanded by that project which I shall *not* focus upon is ultimately concerned with the—again, ostensibly, it must be hoped—paradoxical observation that *what we get through the fundamental way or ways of knowing empirical propositions underdetermines any claims to empirical knowledge*. This is ‘the Cartesian problematic’. In fact, it is perhaps better to say that the Cartesian problematic is concerned with *both* aspects of the generality demanded by that project, but the first one *via* the second one; this does not really alter what has been said above: the Cartesian problematic is still *primarily* concerned with the second aspect of that generality, and the Agrippan problematic—despite appearances and against epistemologico-historical tradition—*really has nothing to do with that second aspect at all*.<sup>6</sup> Thus to say, as I have, that the purview of my investigation is limited is to say that

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 97.

<sup>6</sup> That is, I do not think that the Agrippan problematic is centred around our fallibility, and specifically our fallibility in perceptual matters, as it is often taken to be. Even if we had infallible perceptual capacities that problematic would still be an issue. What it pushes us towards is not an epistemology in which experience has to play a justifying role, but an epistemology which is epistemic subject or agent centred, i.e., one in which justification is considered as an action. Of course, matters of experience come up when we turn to the much more difficult, Kantian problem of fitting the mind or agency into nature without giving up on the intuitively essential characteristics of either—spontaneity and independence, respectively. For a suggestion towards the idea that it is our fallibility which is at the heart of the Agrippan problematic, cf. Lawrence Bonjour, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 7 (from hence, *SEK*), where Bonjour claims that in an ‘epistemically ideal situation’, where ‘truth were somehow immediately and unproblematically accessible’, ‘the concept of justification would be of little significance and would play no independent role in cognition’. On the contrary: I will attempt to suggest that it is exactly justification’s ‘independent

it is only concerned with the first of the two different, radically sceptical problematics just roughly delimited. A successful undermining of the Agrippan problematic does not amount to an explanation of how empirical knowledge is possible, only a partial or incomplete contribution to that project.<sup>7</sup>

To focus on the Agrippan problematic is essentially to focus on the question of how our empirical knowledge *is structured*. That is, the Agrippan sceptic is want to suggest that we cannot have empirical knowledge because no workable structure of empirical justification can be identified and without such a structure we cannot explain how empirical knowledge is possible. For intuitively it is understandable that, if we are trying to explain how empirical knowledge is possible without assuming any empirical knowledge, there must be some originary point at which such a putative explanation takes us, metaphorically, from having *no* empirical knowledge to having *some* empirical knowledge, at which juncture it would appear that we have set out upon such a structuring of empirical justification.

Now to change tack somewhat, in regards to the question of how empirical knowledge is structured—essentially, then, the question of how empirical justification is structured—Wilfrid Sellars once wrote:

One seems forced to choose between the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise (What supports the tortoise?) and the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth (Where does it begin?). Neither will do.<sup>8</sup>

We shall come to recognise ‘the picture of an elephant which rests on a tortoise’ as that epistemological position known as ‘foundationalism’, although in describing it so baldly Sellars at least fails to allude to the rich variety of foundationalisms in the

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role in cognition’ *qua emblematic of agency*, so to speak, that allows us to escape the Agrippan problematic, and that goes for such an ‘epistemically ideal situation’ as well.

<sup>7</sup> This may be thought to be somewhat problematic. I take it, although I cannot argue for this position here, that Sellars has an argument against the Cartesian problematic available to him, although he never explicitly employs it as such. That argument is to the effect that if we cannot test for something then we should regard it as only conceivable and not possible, thus making something like the dreaming possibility or Evil Demon hypothesis ruled out from the start. However, it does not resort to a crude verificationism to accomplish this, but rather something like an appeal to what John McDowell has termed an ‘anti-anti-realism’. Indeed, we might think of Sellars’s argument as an analogue at the level of the objectivity of truth of McDowell’s understanding of the objectivity of meaning. For Sellars’s argument cf. Wilfrid Sellars, ‘Concepts as Involving Laws and Inconceivable Without Them’, *Philosophy of Science*, 15 (1948), pp. 287–315. For discussion of that paper cf. John Haugeland, ‘Truth and Rule-Following’, in John Haugeland, *Having Thought*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 305–361. For McDowell’s talk of ‘anti-anti-realism’ cf. John McDowell ‘Preface’, p. viii, in John McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. vii–ix, and his understanding of the objectivity of meaning cf. John McDowell, ‘Wittgenstein on Following a Rule’, in McDowell, *Mind, Value, and Reality*, pp. 221–262.

<sup>8</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), §38, pp. 78–79, original emphasis. From hence, *EPM*.

epistemologico-historical record. (Which is not to say that *all* foundationalisms *aren't*, effectively, pictures of elephants resting on tortoises.) The other epistemological position he alludes to—‘the picture of a great Hegelian serpent of knowledge with its tail in its mouth’—we shall come to recognise as referring to that epistemological position called ‘coherentism’. Furthermore, we shall come to recognise both of his pointed questions as being right on target: we *must* ask the foundationalist ‘What supports the tortoise?’, and we *must* ask the coherentist ‘Where does it begin?’ or better: where does your structure of empirical justification begin?

But what about Sellars’s own suggestion concerning the structure of empirical justification? This will be my quarry, although here due warning should be given that my elucidation of Sellars’s proposed structure of empirical justification will be, for the simple necessity of space, only partial and incomplete. That is, Sellars’s thought is incredibly systematic and to focus, effectively, *solely* on its epistemological dimension must necessarily do its scope a disservice. I shall not, then, focus on his philosophies of language, mind, perception, and science (even his metaphysics), although these topics will be brushed over. Unfortunately, this means that I leave certain elements of this thesis playing a merely *descriptive* role.

I will argue that Sellars’s own suggestion concerning the structure of empirical justification, one that is importantly based upon a *non*-traditional understanding of what it is for a belief to be justified, allows us to successfully undermine the Agrippan problematic, i.e., it allows us to illustrate why the ostensibly paradoxical observation that the first aspect of the generality demanded by the traditional epistemological project mandates that we require empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge, and yet we cannot assume any empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge is *only* ostensibly paradoxical—indeed, it *is simply a false paradox*. It is in the service of this goal that it is necessary to simply describe certain of Sellars’s positions on those topics already listed. This will leave it open for the Agrippan sceptic to question my conclusion—that Sellars’s epistemology provides the materials to undermine the Agrippan problematic, and so provides a workable structure of empirical knowledge—by questioning those positions of Sellars’s I have only been able to characterise and not defend, though they do not directly fall under the ambit of *his* problematic.

Before turning in greater detail to these matters, however, it will be useful to here delineate the contours of *the extended*, so to speak, understanding of empirical knowledge I shall employ in the proceeding. Put simply, as I shall employ it ‘empirical knowledge’ refers to knowledge dependent upon observation. As such its *source* is



experience—experience is the way of knowing empirical knowledge—although there are a variety of different sources often recognised *within* experience. But if we turn to matters of justification we might also say that experience is what provides the observational evidence for such knowledge, in that it purportedly allows us access to those contingent facts, constituted by the plethora of kinds of objects and their panoply of properties and relations, which it concerns. Note, then, that there are two suggestions here: there is the thought that empirical knowledge is knowledge *derived from experience*, and there is the thought that empirical justification is *dependent upon observational evidence*. One concerns the origin of all empirical knowledge, the other the particular justifications of instances of it. But we do not need to make this an invidious distinction. In regards to an explanation of how empirical knowledge is possible, both the consideration of its source as well as observational evidence will be essential ingredients of our being justified in believing that we have any empirical knowledge.

A distinction which might be invidious, however, is the aforementioned differentiation of sources within experience. For instance, as Stroud writes:

It is clear that the senses are at least very important for human knowledge. Even restricting ourselves to the traditional five senses [*re* audition, sight, smell, taste, and touch] we can begin to appreciate their importance by reflecting on how little someone would ever come to know without them. A person blind and deaf from birth who also lacked taste buds and a sense of smell would know very little about anything, no matter how long he lived. To imagine him also anaesthetized or without a sense of touch is perhaps to stretch altogether to far one's conception of the human organism, or at least a human organism from whom we can hope to learn something about human knowledge. The importance of the senses as a source or channel of knowledge seems undeniable.<sup>9</sup>

Here Stroud is making the point that a person without functioning sense organs—who lacks what is called 'outer' sense—would at least appear to be denied access to mind-independent objects, and thus that we would or should object to ceding him knowledge of the facts of which they are constituents. That is perfectly sound, yet he goes on to claim that assessing *the epistemic provenance*, so to speak, of the senses, or 'outer' sense, 'would then be assessing the credentials of what is often called our... 'empirical' knowledge'.<sup>10</sup> But we should be careful with equating knowledge derived from the senses simply *with* empirical knowledge else we might fail to fully recognise a second

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<sup>9</sup> Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 6—7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

important dimension of the latter. A more inclusive conception of empirical knowledge would not restrict ‘the relevant notion of experience’, i.e., *the* source of empirical knowledge, ‘to sense experience in a narrow sense, but should rather be understood to include any sort of cognitive factor or element which, whatever its other characteristics may be, provides or constitutes information’ concerning matters of contingent fact.<sup>11</sup> That is, introspective and memory knowledge, etc., i.e., knowledge derived from ‘inner’ sense, is just as *empirical* as knowledge of mind-independent objects, say. This is the extended understanding of empirical knowledge. Nonetheless, when we enquire as to the structure of empirical justification we will find ourselves concerned, more often than not, with the epistemic provenance of empirical knowledge derived from the senses. This would appear to be a simple consequence of the empiricist proclivities of modern epistemology, something from which I shall not demure in general since it raises little trouble in the foregoing; I raise this issue now simply because it is of decided importance throughout my investigation.

I begin chapter one (§1.1) by introducing what is called ‘the standard analysis of knowledge’, moving on to how we should conceive of a reason to believe some proposition. I locate four epistemic loci within that notion at which the Agrippan problematic may attack the pursuit of empirical knowledge. In the next section (§1.2) I give an overview of scepticism.

In chapter two I move onto the Agrippan problematic. In the first section (§2.1) I introduce what is called ‘the epistemic regress argument’—the most important application of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic—highlighting its premise, and uncovering two assumptions which underlie it. In the next section (§2.2) I turn to that argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic, highlighting how the Agrippan sceptic thinks he can generate the ostensibly paradoxical statement at the heart of his problematic. I then suggest that he cannot do so, nor that he can argue for the assumptions underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument. However, I also suggest that they are in any case hard to question. In the next section (§2.3) I turn to what I have called ‘foundationalism’ and ‘coherentism’, detailing the essentials of how those positions seek to respond to the epistemic regress argument. In the final section (§2.4) I turn to another application of the argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic, that which I call ‘the problem of the criterion’. This leads to the most egregious instance of the ostensibly paradoxical observation at the heart of the Agrippan problematic.

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<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 192.

In chapter three I move onto foundationalism. In the first section (§3.1) I describe another application of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic which I call ‘the evidential regress argument’. I then detail the simplest way in which the foundationalist may respond to that argument—the foundationalist position I call ‘the appearance theory’. In the next section (§3.2) I argue that the appearance theory is to be objected to for failing to escape the evidential regress argument. In the next section (§3.3) I suggest that even if the appearance theory could escape the evidential regress argument it would in any case fail to escape the fourth and final application of the argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic that I investigate, the argument I call ‘Bonjour’s argument’. I then detail a foundationalist position—what I call ‘the sense-datum theory’—which may be able to escape all four of the applications of the argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic. However, in the final section (§3.4) I argue against the sense-datum theory being able to accomplish this feat.

In chapter four I turn to the semantic aspect of foundationalism. In the first section (§4.1) I turn to Sellars’s analysis of what I call ‘looks-talk’, a major semantic crutch of the foundationalist. Via that analysis I argue that the foundationalist’s semantic position is also to be questioned. That is, I argue that we should reject what I call ‘semantic’ or ‘logical atomism’ in favour of a more holistic semantic account. In the final section (§4.2), in looking at how Sellars thinks we might explain his analysis of looks-talk, I argue against the ontological claims of the sense-datum theorist and introduce one of Sellars’s conceptual innovations, i.e., the theoretical introduction of concepts.

In chapter five I turn to coherentism. In the first section (§5.1) I question the formal sufficiency of the coherentist’s position in regards to undermining the epistemic regress argument, pointing out that his appeal to the notion of coherence importantly ignores two of the elements I have previously identified within the notion of a reason to believe some proposition. In the final section (§5.2) I argue that the coherentist fails to escape the Agrippan problematic because of the formal insufficiency of his central appeal, i.e., because it fails to encapsulate those two elements of a reason to believe some proposition. I suggest that coherentism is essentially a more holistic foundationalism.

In chapter six I turn to Sellars’s epistemology and general philosophy of mind. In the first section (§6.1) I detail his account of the theoretical introduction of thoughts. In the next sections (§§6.2—6.4) I turn to his epistemology, identifying how he attempts

to escape both the epistemic regress argument and Bonjour's argument. In the final two sections (§§6.5—6.6) I criticise and amend the structure of knowledge characterised in the previous two sections, going beyond Sellars's own—flawed—statement of his position in important respects. Nonetheless, I make use of one final idea of Sellars's, related to his theoretical introduction of thoughts, which enables that amended position to escape the Agrippan problematic.

In conclusion, I situate my amended version of Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge in regards to the morals I have drawn in the preceding from the different applications of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic, making explicit how it deals with each one. However, I end on an ambivalent note, by suggesting that Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge, even amended, faces a certain difficulty, although, importantly, not one to be associated with the Agrippan problematic. Nonetheless, I conclude by suggesting that, even if Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge is to be rejected because of this difficulty, since it is not engendered by the Agrippan problematic the fact that Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge appears to escape the Agrippan problematic is enough to suggest that the manner in which it appears to escape that problematic is the manner in which the latter must be escaped.

## Chapter One: Knowledge and Scepticism

### Introduction

In this chapter we examine certain general issues before beginning the investigation proper.

In the first section I present what is called ‘the standard analysis of knowledge’, or ‘the tripartite definition of knowledge’, i.e., that an instance of knowledge is an instance of *a justified true belief*. Furthermore, I make two important points concerning the notion of justification—one intuitive and one stemming from the first aspect of the generality demanded by the traditional epistemological project—as well as identifying four epistemic loci at which the Agrippan sceptic will attack the pursuit of empirical knowledge.

In the next section (§1.2) I give a short overview of scepticism, differentiating philosophical scepticisms from others, local from global, and finally philosophical scepticisms which attack knowledge directly or, more radically, via the notion of justification.

### §1.1. Knowledge and Justification

It is best to start with the question of what an instance of knowledge, be it empirical or otherwise, amounts to. I will begin, therefore, by setting out what is called ‘the standard analysis of knowledge’, or ‘the tripartite definition of knowledge’, before turning to the issue of how we are to understand the notion of justification—or better: *what a reason to believe amounts to*. This will enable me to pinpoint *four epistemic loci* within the notion of justification where the Agrippan problematic may attack the pursuit of empirical knowledge.

The standard analysis of knowledge takes an instance of knowledge to amount to *a justified true belief*. That is, an epistemic subject *s* knows that *p* if and only if (from hence, *iff*):

1. *p*,
2. *s* believes *p*,
3. *s*’s belief that *p* is justified.

To understand this account we should ask why the satisfaction of (1.) and (2.), i.e., *s*'s *true belief* that *p*, whilst necessary, is not sufficient for *s* to be in possession of knowledge. If I believe that 'Martians exist', and Martians do exist as a matter of contingent fact, why do these 'subjective' and 'objective' factors, respectively, *not* amount to my being in possession of knowledge? *For intuitively the purpose of knowledge is the belief of truth*, so why should we not just count true belief as knowledge?

A reason along the following lines is often given in defence of the conclusion that the satisfaction of (1.) and (2.), whilst necessary, is not sufficient for an instance of knowledge. I could believe that 'Martians exist', when Martians do exist as a matter of contingent fact, without my having a reason to believe that proposition. In such a scenario my belief that 'Martians exist' would only *happen* to be true—it would be something like a mere opinion or a lucky guess. So imagine that, having such a true belief, but without my having a reason to believe its propositional content, I come across a journal article by a noted scientist which argues for the—*ex hypothesi*—*false* conclusion that on our best, current understanding of the conditions required to originate and sustain life, Mars, by all accounts, should be *lifeless*. As a rational being (let us assume!) it would be reasonable of me to alter my belief in light of *this evidence*: in fact, it transpires, I should believe that 'Martians don't exist'. It is normal to say that my belief that 'Martians exist', though actually true, was only *accidentally* so. Knowledge, on the other hand, is to be understood as *non-accidentally* true belief.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly explicit in the above scenario is the suggestion that my true belief that 'Martians exist' would have been non-accidentally so if I had had a reason to believe its propositional content. That is, if my true belief that 'Martians exist' had been justified.

Now, I want to spend the remainder of this section going over some points concerning what a reason to believe amounts to as well as indicating the four epistemic loci I flagged above at which the Agrippan problematic may attack the pursuit of empirical knowledge.

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<sup>12</sup> It is now a commonplace that the tripartite definition of knowledge is, at least, necessary but not sufficient as a definition of knowledge. This is a consequence of Gettier-type counter-examples, i.e., examples of justified true belief which do not amount to knowledge. I have no desire to get into the game of actually trying to escape such counter-examples, merely to say that, as opposed to jettisoning the tripartite definition entirely, it must be my stance that all it requires is supplementation. Indeed, Sellars's proposed structure of empirical knowledge has built into it a possible response to such counter-examples, in that it has built into it the idea 'that a justifying inference cannot yield knowledge if it depends essentially on any false lemmas'. For such counter-examples, cf. Edmund Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', *Analysis*, 23 (1963), pp. 121—123. For quote, cf. M. Williams, *UD*, p. 94. Williams takes this proposal from Gilbert Harman, *Thought*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973). Also, see n. 164, below.

Perhaps the most intuitive point to be made concerning a reason to believe is this: a reason to believe must be indicative of the truth of the proposition it concerns. This fits well with the aforementioned intuitive purpose of knowledge, i.e., the belief of truth. However, I also take it that attempting to explain how empirical knowledge is possible, an attempt that does not assume any empirical knowledge and so respects the first aspect of the generality demanded by the traditional epistemological project, entails a 'retreat into subjectivity': 'If all knowledge of the world is up for assessment, I cannot take for granted anything having to do with my or anyone else's worldly situation'.<sup>13</sup> In other words, an explanation of how empirical knowledge is possible must make it intelligible how *I myself qua epistemic subject* can have a reason to believe the proposition that 'Martians exist' *in my cognitive possession* else that explanation will fail to respect the first aspect of the generality demanded by the traditional epistemological project. And to say that an explanation of how empirical knowledge is possible must make it intelligible how *I myself qua epistemic subject* can have a reason to believe that proposition in my cognitive possession entails that it must make it intelligible that *I myself qua epistemic subject* can *recognise* that a reason to believe that proposition *is* a reason to believe that proposition, i.e., that it is *actually* or *unconditionally* indicative of the truth of that proposition—that is what it means for me to have a reason to believe that proposition in my cognitive possession. An explanation of how empirical knowledge is possible would have failed to respect that first aspect of the generality demanded by the traditional epistemological project if it did not allow us to recognise a reason to believe as a reason to believe. (3.), therefore, is perhaps not ideally perspicuous in reflecting this point and should instead be formulated thus:

3\*. *s*'s belief that *p* is justified for *s*.<sup>14</sup>

The demand that *I myself qua epistemic subject* be able to recognise a reason to believe some proposition as a reason to believe that proposition is of a piece with the

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<sup>13</sup> M. Williams, *UD*, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> In putting the matter like this, I may be taken to be suggesting that I am more concerned with what is often called 'doxastic' justification than 'propositional' justification. The latter refers to 'the propositional content of a belief state', the former 'the belief state itself'. This distinction may be taken to allow that an epistemic subject may *be* propositionally justified in believing a proposition, even if he is *not* doxastically justified in believing that proposition, and, moreover, that he is *both* propositionally *and* doxastically justified in believing a proposition, *but not for the same reason*. Since I want to avoid that latter consequence, I am really to be understood as demanding that, at some point, an epistemic subject must be *both* propositionally *and* doxastically justified in believing a proposition *for the same reason*, if his belief in that proposition is to amount to an instance of knowledge for him. For the distinction, cf. Peter Klein, 'Human Knowledge and the Infinite Progress of Reasoning', *Philosophical Studies*, 134 (1; 2007), p. 6.

thought that if I know that *p* then *I know that I know that p*. That is, it is an *internalistic* demand.<sup>15</sup> Effectively, then, I am suggesting that the traditional epistemological project is an internalistic enterprise because it mandates that any successful explanation of how empirical knowledge is possible must build from a subjective, reflective starting point. Knowing that I know that *p* is clearly something *external* to my knowing that *p*, yet for that to be possible the *internal composition* of a reason to believe that *p* must be such that I can recognise that it is a reason to believe that *p*. Let us return to our example with these thoughts in mind and try to tease out the intuitive composition of a reason to believe the proposition that ‘Martians exist’ then.

Let us alter that example slightly: say that I believe that ‘Martians exist’, that Martians do exist as a matter of contingent fact, and that I come across a journal article which argues for the—*ex hypothesi*—true conclusion that on our best, current understanding of the conditions required to originate and sustain life, there should be life on Mars. That article, or the theses it contains, may be understood as acting as *evidence in favour* of the proposition that ‘Martians exist’. That is, *if* I understand those theses, *then* I can also understand that the proposition ‘Martians exist’ is true, or likely to be true, *if* those theses themselves are true, or likely to be true; I can *deduce* that conditional conclusion from those theses (from my occurrent belief in those theses, say). So again, like a reason to believe that proposition, we should understand evidence in favour of it as being indicative of its truth, even if such indication is in that conditional sense. But such evidence does not as yet constitute a reason to believe that proposition.

What more is needed? It would appear that I also require some evidence to the effect that those theses themselves are true. Yet they themselves—their content—would not appear indicative of that fact; something about them external to their content must be indicative of that fact. Let us say, to stick with the example above, that they have *the epistemic property* of being formulated by a noted scientist. Now, their having such a property *in itself* has nothing directly to do with whether the proposition that ‘Martians exist’ is likely to be true, and so we cannot say that my being cognitively aware of the

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<sup>15</sup> Note that the appeal to internalism—and, indeed, a *very strong form of that thesis*—is not connected to the tripartite definition of knowledge in and of itself. It is a consequence of our basic assumption that the traditional epistemological project is so much as intelligible. The point being that, so long as it is assumed that that project is so much as intelligible, then the *only* satisfactory solution to its problems will be an internalist one that safeguards iterativity, i.e., a position which allows the recognition of a reason to believe some proposition as a reason to believe that proposition—as actually or unconditionally indicative of the truth of that proposition. Of course, if it can be *proved* that the traditional epistemological project and its dictates are *unintelligible*, then such a strong internalism may not be required, but that is not something attempted in this thesis. For the implicit distinction between internalism and externalism employed here see n. 15, below, which is a more apt place to go into it.



fact that they have this property, as well as my understanding those theses themselves, and so understanding that they are indicative of the truth of the proposition that 'Martians exist' if they themselves are true, or likely to be true, gives me a reason to believe that proposition. Which is essentially to say that evidence alone, even when *tiered*, so to speak, as delineated above, is *epistemically inert*. For even with such secondary evidence *my evidence in general in favour of* the proposition that 'Martians exist'—both the theses, and the fact that they are formulated by a noted scientist—is still only *putative* evidence in favour of that proposition.

The final element of a reason to believe the proposition that 'Martians exist', over and above my evidence in general in favour of that proposition, is an *inductively* inferred *epistemic principle* that licences me to take my putative evidence in general in favour of that proposition as actual evidence in general in favour of that proposition, in that it suggests that statements which exhibit that epistemic property are likely to be true. Only if I have such a principle *in addition to* my evidence in general in favour of the proposition that 'Martians exist' will I have a reason to believe that proposition. In regards to our example such a principle would amount to something along the lines of *the conditional statement*: 'If those theses have the epistemic property of being formulated by that noted scientist, *then* they are likely to be true'.

If I am in cognitive possession of *all these three elements* then I can therefore reason like this:

- a. In regards to their content the theses are indicative of the likely truth of the proposition that 'Martians exist' (belief).
- b. If those theses themselves are likely to be true, then the proposition that 'Martian exist' is likely to be true (by (a)).
- c. Those theses exhibit the epistemic property of being formulated by a noted scientist (belief).
- d. If those theses exhibit the epistemic property of being formulated by that noted scientist, then those theses are likely to be true (belief).
- e. Therefore, those theses are likely to be true (by (c.) and (d.)).
- f. Therefore, the proposition that 'Martians exist' is likely to be true (by (b.) and (e.)).

Then, given (f.) and my actual belief that 'Martians exist', it will be the case that I can know that I know that 'Martians exist'—I will have a justified true belief that 'Martians

exist' as well as being aware of the fact that it is justified, i.e., (f.). So note, then, that without any of those three elements in my cognitive possession I could not have, and so not recognise that I have, a reason to believe that proposition.<sup>16</sup>

We are now in a position to pinpoint the four epistemic loci within the notion of justification where the Agrippan sceptic may attack the pursuit of empirical knowledge. Firstly, the Agrippan sceptic will attack the implicit thought of the foregoing that a reason to believe seems to be something *epistemically distinct* from belief in the proposition it concerns. That is:

- I. The Agrippan sceptic will attack the epistemic distinctness of a reason to believe from belief in the proposition it concerns.

Secondly, the Agrippan sceptic will attack the evidence in favour of that proposition from the proposition it concerns. For the epistemic distinctness of a reason to believe from belief in the proposition it concerns also entails the epistemic distinctness of the evidence in favour of that proposition from the proposition it concerns. That is:

- II. The Agrippan sceptic will attack the epistemic distinctness of the evidence in favour of a proposition from the proposition it concerns.

Thirdly, the Agrippan sceptic will attack the secondary evidence concerning the epistemic property exhibited by the evidence in favour of that proposition. For the epistemic distinctness of the evidence in favour of that proposition entails the epistemic distinctness of the secondary evidence concerning the epistemic property exhibited by the evidence in favour of that proposition from the evidence in favour of that proposition. That is:

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<sup>16</sup> If we assume, as we are, that the traditional epistemological project is so much as intelligible, then the distinction between internalism and externalism should be drawn along the following lines: an externalist position will be *any* position which does *not* require that an epistemic subject has *all* three elements of a reason to believe some proposition in their cognitive possession for their belief in that proposition to be justified for them, i.e., a position which does *not* require that he recognises that the reason to believe that proposition is actually or unconditionally indicative of its truth. This is not, of course, the only manner in which this distinction can be drawn; indeed, to repeat: *this is all a consequence of the assumption that the traditional epistemological project is so much as intelligible*. For more on the problem with externalism, as so defined, *re* the traditional epistemological project, cf. Stroud, 'Understanding Human Knowledge in General', pp. 109—121. It should be noted that Stroud does *not* think that project is intelligible, although he does not *therefore* think that externalism is a satisfactory epistemological position, for reasons related to Cartesian scepticism. Cf. Barry Stroud, 'Scepticism and the Senses', *European Journal of Philosophy*, 17 (4; 2009), pp. 559—570.

- III. The Agrippan sceptic will attack the epistemic distinctness of the secondary evidence concerning the epistemic property exhibited by the evidence in favour of that proposition from the evidence in favour of that proposition.

Fourthly and finally, the Agrippan sceptic will attack the epistemic principle which licences an epistemic subject to take his putative evidence in general in favour of that proposition as actual evidence in general in favour of that proposition. For the epistemic distinctness of the putative evidence in general in favour of that proposition entails the epistemic distinctness of the epistemic principle licensing an epistemic subject to take his putative evidence in general in favour of that proposition as actual evidence in general in favour of that proposition from the evidence in general in favour of that proposition. That is:

- IV. The Agrippan sceptic will attack the epistemic distinctness of the epistemic principle which licences an epistemic subject to take his putative evidence in general in favour of that proposition as actual evidence in general in favour of that proposition from the evidence in general in favour of that proposition.

### §1.2. Scepticism and Radical Scepticism

Any position or point of view may be called 'sceptical' if it holds that knowledge is impossible, or that knowledge is impossible in a certain specified domain. But there are a variety of such positions, and not all of them amount to what may be called 'a philosophical scepticism'. That is, any position which comes under the ambit of philosophical scepticism *must involve an argument*, however not every position which may be called 'sceptical' need do so.

For instance, someone who dogmatically asks 'How do you know?' in response to every assertion or claim to knowledge that anyone ever makes in his vicinity would be a sceptic, but not necessarily exhibit a philosophical scepticism. As Jonathan Dancy comments: 'This repeated question is very successful at reducing others to impotent silence, but there is very little that can be learnt from it until we know what lies behind it'.<sup>17</sup> Now clearly *something* could lie behind that person's constant reiteration of that question, e.g., Dancy suggests the following premises:

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1985), p. 7. From hence, *ICE*.

- 1 No one knows that *p* unless he can show that *p*.
- 2 The attempt to answer the question 'How do you know that *p*?' by simply restating that *p* cannot be successful. It begs the question.<sup>18</sup>

Yet if he makes no allusion to some such premise as (1) or (2) then we should ignore him for 'not presenting an interesting philosophical position', and if he *does* make an allusion to some such premise then he *has* offered an argument for his scepticism after all—he is not as dogmatic as he first appears: his is a philosophical scepticism. The point being that by making such an allusion that person opens his scepticism up to the possibility of *rebuttal*. For instance, as Dancy writes:

the two propositions above are dubious. The second, for instance, amounts to an assertion that one cannot answer the question 'How do you know you are in pain?' by simply saying 'Because I am in pain'. Someone who gives this answer clearly takes it that in some cases it works, and we must not beg the question against him.<sup>19</sup>

We could also recognise another kind of sceptic whose scepticism isn't necessarily philosophical. Dancy writes: 'This sceptic is a hard-nosed person who claims that most people allow themselves to be persuaded by what is really rather weak evidence, but that he needs more than that to convince *him*'.<sup>20</sup> However, note that even then such a person only reaches scepticism *proper*, so to speak—only calls knowledge into doubt—'when the standards [of evidence he purportedly adheres to] are set so high they cannot be fulfilled'.<sup>21</sup> Like in our first example, this is philosophically uninteresting unless he offers an argument as to why *our* standards of evidence *should be* 'set so high', i.e., why *his* standards of evidence *are correct*, but if he does then again his is a philosophical scepticism. And to enter a caveat: if he does offer an argument as to why the standards of evidence should be set so high, and if that argument is to have any traction, then it must be 'justified by appeal to our standards [of evidence] as well as his', in order to guarantee that we are not simply talking past one another.<sup>22</sup> Yet as Dancy comments: 'There is then the danger of incoherence; is it consistent to provide an argument justified by normal standards of evidence, to the effect that those standards are inappropriate?'<sup>23</sup> (In fact, we shall shortly meet an

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 7. I do not agree with this claim as it stands.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 8, original emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

argument that such a sceptic might employ below, so it will be useful to keep these points in mind.)

So any position or point of view which can be labelled a 'philosophical scepticism' should be taken to hold that knowledge is impossible, or knowledge is impossible in a certain specified domain, in virtue of an argument to that effect. There is an obvious distinction to be drawn here between philosophical scepticisms that call into question the possibility of knowledge in general, and those which only call it into question in regards to a certain specified domain. Dancy writes:

this distinction is between local and global sceptical arguments. Local scepticism maintains that, even if knowledge is possible elsewhere, it is for special reasons not available in this or that selected area. Favourite areas for local scepticism are ethics, religion and the future. We can know how things are in front of our noses, maybe, but it is not possible to know that an altruistic act is morally good, nor that God exists, nor that you will have eggs for breakfast tomorrow. Obviously local scepticism hopes to feed on special features of the areas it is concerned with. But... it is very hard to keep one's local scepticism local. A local ethical scepticism, for instance, tends very quickly to spread out and become a general scepticism about the unobserved or about the possibility of scientific knowledge. The problem is to find a convincing argument for local ethical scepticism which has no expansionist tendencies.<sup>24</sup>

This suggests a sliding scale concerning the *scope* attributed to philosophical scepticisms: a 'local' philosophical scepticism calls knowledge into doubt in a certain specified domain, a 'global' philosophical scepticism calls it into doubt, we might say, in *more than one* specified domain. Notice that 'a general scepticism about the unobserved or about the possibility of scientific knowledge' would appear to be Dancy's examples of 'global sceptical arguments', but those domains are surely *less* global than empirical knowledge. The Agrippan problematic, as I have characterised it, concerns all our knowledge of the world taken together and thus must be a *truly* global philosophical scepticism. If we cannot explain the possibility of empirical knowledge then we cannot have knowledge of the unobserved, or again scientific knowledge, in any case.

Given the subject-matter of my investigation, then, the local/global distinction between philosophical scepticisms is of little import (indeed, as Dancy makes clear 'it is very hard to keep one's local scepticism local' anyway). A more important distinction can be made between philosophical scepticisms however. Philosophical scepticisms, whether local or global, may be understood to apply at two separate epistemological

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

levels. For the philosophical sceptic can pose an argument which ‘can attack the notion of knowledge directly, but leave other related notions, crucially that of justified belief, untouched’. In regards to this point, Michael Williams writes:

it has been argued by Peter Unger that “know”, like “flat” is an “absolute term.” Strictly speaking, a surface is flat if and only if it has no bumps whatsoever, which means that no physical surface is ever really flat. Similarly, knowledge requires absolute certainty: I know something if and only if there is no possibility, however remote, that I am wrong. On this view, there is a kind of incoherence in combining a claim to know that *P* with an admission that one might nevertheless be in error. Of course, some error possibilities are so remote that, for ordinary practical purposes, we rightly disregard them.... But something very similar can be said about bumps: for practical purposes, such as playing billiards, a surface’s minute irregularities do not matter. Still, all this means is that the table is flat enough for playing billiards, not that it is really flat. So by the same token, our “knowledge” may be knowledge for all practical purposes; but... it will not really be *knowledge*.<sup>25</sup>

This kind or type of philosophical scepticism we shall call ‘knowledge-specific’. It is a philosophical scepticism, moreover, that the second sceptic introduced above might employ to justify his ultra-high standards of evidence—what could be a higher standard of evidence than ‘absolute certainty’, i.e., ‘if and only if there is no possibility, however remote, that I am wrong’ about *p*? That would guarantee the truth of *p*. Indeed, this argument might be taken to side-step the ‘danger of incoherence’ which we have seen Dancy associate with whether it is ‘consistent to provide an argument justified by normal standards of evidence, to the effect that those standards are inappropriate’. It could be said to do this by highlighting that any such incoherence must in fact accrue to *our* defence of those standards of evidence, given that such terms as ‘know’ and ‘flat’ are—‘Strictly speaking’—‘absolute terms’. That is, since our everyday use of such terms already *implicitly* appeal to that sceptic’s ultra-high standards of evidence it is *we* who are being incoherent in denying that in using those terms we are in error when we are anything less than absolutely certain, or in referring to anything less than absolute flatness, respectively. In that case it would be *we* who beg the question.

But as Williams goes on to say:

Clearly, the discovery that nothing is absolutely flat is not disturbing. This is because, when we claim that a billiard table is flat, we mean that the surface has no irregularities that could disturb the path of a billiard ball; and if we claim that it is *really* flat, we mean flat enough to satisfy the standards of the

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<sup>25</sup> M. Williams, *UD*, pp. 48–49, original emphasis. Williams refers to Peter Unger, *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

most exacting player. But even if we mean more than this—even if, in our thoughtless way, we mean that it is free of even the most microscopic bump—showing us the error of our ways will not place us in conflict with anything we ordinarily *need* to claim, which means that we can accept correction without strain. Accordingly, if scepticism rested on no more than the analogy between “know” and “flat,” scepticism would not point to a deep and unsettling truth about the human condition. To preserve the analogy, ordinary knowledge claims would have to stand to justification as ordinary flatness claims stand to flatness, demanding whatever measure is appropriate to the purpose in hand. Absolute certainty, like absolute flatness, would be an idealized condition that we do not expect to find realized in the actual world.<sup>26</sup>

This passage offers both a suggestion of a rejoinder to the sceptic who argues in such a manner, as well as signs of something more worrying. In the first case, we might simply respond to the sceptic who argues for his ultra-high standards of evidence by objecting that ‘know’ and ‘flat’ are *not*—strictly speaking—absolute terms. If that is the case then he will require another argument to underlie his position—at least if he does in fact wish to be a philosophical sceptic, and the danger of incoherence may yet reappear, only this time in regards to his own side of the debate. However, we are not really interested in responding to that argument anyway. More importantly for our purposes, how might a sceptical argument ‘place us in conflict with’ something ‘we ordinarily need to claim’, such that it points ‘to a deep and unsettling truth about the human condition’?

Dancy writes:

It has... been suggested that epistemology could survive the loss of the concept knowledge, because all the important epistemological questions can equally profitably be rephrased using the concept of justified belief. Thus instead of asking whether we can ever know what will happen in the future, we ask in which if any circumstances our beliefs about the future are justified.<sup>27</sup>

Compare Crispin Wright:

odd as it might first seem to say so... knowledge is not really the proper central concern of epistemologico-sceptical enquiry. There is not necessarily any lasting discomfort in the claim that, contrary to our preconceptions, we have no genuine knowledge in some broad area of thought—say in the area of theoretical science. We can live with the concession that we do not, strictly, *know* some of the things we believed ourselves to know, provided we can retain the thought that we are fully justified in accepting them. That concession is what we might call the Russellian Retreat. For Russell... proposed that such is exactly the message that philosophical epistemology generally has for us: we must content ourselves with probability,

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 49, original emphasis.

<sup>27</sup> Dancy, *ICE*, p. 21.

defeasibility and inconclusive justification where standardly we had wanted to claim more. What, however, is not tolerable is the thesis that, among propositions about, for instance, the material world, other minds, or the past, we never actually attain to genuinely justified opinion; that no real distinction corresponds to that which we are accustomed to draw between grounded and ungrounded beliefs, earned information and mere prejudice or dogma. But just this claim is what the best—*radical*—sceptical arguments purport to deliver....<sup>28</sup>

So consider Dancy's example of the domain of our knowledge of the future. If we do associate knowledge with absolute certainty for what ever reason, as the sceptic who demands ultra-high standards of evidence would have us do, then, given the astronomical (literally!) amount of evidence we would require to exactly predict what will happen in an hour's or even a second's time, we cannot have knowledge of the course of future events—basically, we cannot satisfy the implicit demands of (3\*) in application to *an instance of knowledge* in that domain. This is because, if knowledge demands absolute certainty, then we cannot rest satisfied with a reason to believe being *merely indicative* of the truth of the proposition it concerns, it must be *absolutely certainly indicative* of the truth of that proposition. Therefore, we cannot ever take putative evidence in favour of some proposition concerning the course of future events as actual evidence in favour of that proposition because the epistemic principle we *should* utilise to do so only licences us to take putative evidence in favour of that proposition as actual evidence in favour of that proposition if it is absolutely certainly indicative of the truth of that proposition, and we simply cannot have evidence that is so indicative.

But we may accept all that and still have justified belief in the course of future events. Since absolute certainty in empirical matters is normally taken to be 'an idealized condition that we do not expect to find realized in the actual world' in any case, i.e., by natural scientific investigation, it does not appear too problematic if we just fall back to only requiring that *our beliefs* about the course of future events are justified, in the sense that a reason to believe is merely indicative of the truth of the proposition it concerns and that such reasons are available concerning propositions concerning the course of future events. That is, knowledge of the course of future events may be denied us but that does not mean that we cannot be justified in believing in how that course might pan out. Yet if we could not even take ourselves to be able to predict the course of future events to any degree *whatsoever*—if no such reasons to believe concerning

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<sup>28</sup> Crispin Wright, 'Scepticism and Dreaming: Imploding the Demon', *Mind*, 100 (397; 1991), p. 88, original emphasis.



propositions concerning the course of future events were available—we might feel that we are placed in conflict with something which we ordinarily need to claim. Should I take an umbrella with me or wear shorts today? Or is it going to snow?

A philosophical scepticism which suggests that we never ‘attain to genuinely justified opinion; that no real distinction corresponds to that which we are accustomed to draw between grounded and ungrounded beliefs, earned information and mere prejudice or dogma’ we shall call a ‘radical’ philosophical scepticism. The Agrippan problematic, as we shall see, is a truly global and radical philosophical scepticism. (In fact, from hence we shall return to the parlance I employed in the introduction in which ‘a radical philosophical scepticism’ was termed ‘a radical scepticism’—or, indeed, simply ‘radical scepticism’.)

## Chapter Two: The Agrippan Problematic

### Introduction

In this chapter I set out what I have called ‘the Agrippan problematic’. In the first section I present what is commonly called ‘the epistemic regress argument’. This is the first, and most well known, application of the general argumentative methodology at the heart of the Agrippan problematic. In it the Agrippan sceptic applies that argumentative methodology to the first of the epistemic loci I identified in §1.1., i.e., (I.). Not only will I highlight the argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic in application to that epistemic locus in this section, but importantly I uncover two assumptions which underlie the premise of the epistemic regress argument, and suggest that they are the point at which its conclusion can be challenged.

Those two assumptions, however, are not meant to be *mere* assumptions. The Agrippan sceptic thinks he can argue for them. In the next section (§2.2) I turn to the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic which underlies each and every one of its applications. It is that general argumentative methodology—indeed, a specific claim at its centre—which the Agrippan sceptic takes to ensure the validity of those assumptions. However, I suggest that, in fact, in virtue of that claim he can argue for neither, and I end this section by suggesting that the epistemologist may therefore question either of the two assumptions underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument, and roughly delimit *the story*, so to speak, to be told throughout the rest of my investigation.

In the next section (§2.3) I turn to the most traditional responses to the epistemic regress argument, i.e., those positions which I designated in the introduction ‘foundationalism’ and ‘coherentism’. The former, I suggest, questions the second assumption underlying the premise of that argument; the latter, on the other hand, questions neither that nor the first assumption. Coherentism, I claim, represents an insufficient reaction against foundationalism—it is *between two worlds*, so to speak.

In the final section of this chapter (§2.4) I illustrate the application of the Agrippan sceptic’s general argumentative methodology to the fourth of the epistemic loci I identified in §1.1., i.e., (IV.). We shall call this argument ‘the problem of the criterion’ and it can be understood as formulating the most clear cut case of the ostensibly paradoxical observation at the heart of the Agrippan problematic. Moreover, in this section I highlight the methodological priority of the epistemologist first

responding to the epistemic regress argument before turning to respond to any of the other applications of the argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic.

Thus in this chapter I *bookend*, so to speak, the four epistemic loci within the notion of justification where the Agrippan problematic may attack the pursuit of empirical knowledge. In doing this I do not mean to suggest that the applications of that argumentative methodology to those other two loci—(II.) and (III.)—are *less* important applications of that methodology; in fact, I think that none of those applications can be undermined without the others also being undermined. However, the two arguments we shall focus on are nonetheless the most prevalent in the literature.

### §2.1. The Agrippan Problematic I: The Epistemic Regress Argument

The epistemic regress argument has been said to be ‘the most crucial in the entire theory of knowledge’ and, moreover, that ‘The stand which a philosopher takes here will decisively shape the whole structure of his epistemological account’.<sup>29</sup> This argument is often invoked as an argument *for* foundationalism, in that, as we shall see, foundationalism appears to be the most obvious or intuitive, non-capitulatory response to it. But I shall instead characterise it without reference to that position in an effort to expose its underlying argumentative methodology and assumptions, i.e., the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic, which takes the form of a *trilemma*.

As has been illustrated in the foregoing, it is an obvious thought that many of our empirical beliefs are *inferentially justified*. As Bonjour writes:

it seems highly plausible to suppose that many of a person’s contingent or empirical beliefs are interrelated in such a way that if a particular belief of [*sic* should be ‘or’] conjunction of beliefs were somehow known or assumed to be true, this would provide a good reason for supposing that some further belief was true. An explicit statement of such a reason would take the form of an argument or inference from the former belief or conjunction of beliefs as premise to the latter belief as conclusion. Such a putatively justifying reason may appropriately be referred to as a *conditional reason*. But it is obvious that the existence of a conditional reason of this sort can yield a reason or justification *simpliciter* for its nonconditional conclusion only if there is some further reason or justification, which must seemingly be epistemically prior, for accepting the truth of its premises.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 18.

<sup>30</sup> Lawrence Bonjour, ‘The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism’, p. 118, original emphasis, in John Greco and Ernest Sosa (eds.), *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), pp. 117–142.

In §1.1 I offered a schematic of how a ‘conjunction of beliefs’ could ‘provide a good reason for supposing that some further belief was true’. In regards to my belief that ‘Martians exist’ I suggested that the following conjunction of beliefs might act as an—*inferential*, we might now say—reason to believe that proposition:

- a. In regards to their content the theses are indicative of the likely truth of the proposition that ‘Martians exist’ (belief).
- b. If those theses themselves are likely to be true, then the proposition that ‘Martian exist’ is likely to be true (by (a.)).
- c. Those theses exhibit the epistemic property of being formulated by a noted scientist (belief).
- d. If those theses exhibit the epistemic property of being formulated by that noted scientist, then those theses are likely to be true (belief).
- e. Therefore, those theses are likely to be true (by (c.) and (d.)).
- f. Therefore, the proposition that ‘Martians exist’ is likely to be true (by (b.) and (e.)).

But the conclusion of some such reasoning process, i.e., (f.), will, Bonjour is suggesting, only be *conditional*, and so my belief that ‘Martians exist’ only conditionally justified by it, unless those beliefs constitutive of that conjunction of beliefs which leads to (f.) *are themselves justified*.

Let us consider this at an abstract level: say an epistemic subject *a* (not *s* for the moment to avoid any terminological confusion) believes that *p*, and that *a*’s belief that *p* is justified by his belief that *q*, in that, for some reason, *q* is ‘epistemically prior’ to *p*—*a*’s belief that *q* is a ‘premise-belief’ *in this inferential sense* for his belief that *p*.<sup>31</sup> The justification of *a*’s belief that *p* will *only* be conditional or putative *unless* his belief that *q* is also justified. But the justification of *a*’s belief that *q* will itself only be conditional unless his belief that *r* is justified, and so on. How, then, does *a* break out of this regress of conditional justification to the ‘nonconditional conclusion’ that all these inferentially justified beliefs of his *are actually justified*? Note, however, the *implicit* and important assumption of this abstraction: the only way that a belief can justify another belief is inferentially. For we can imagine, however this is to be actually characterised, *a*’s belief

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 119.

that  $p$  justifying, and being justified in turn, by his belief that  $q$ , without either being inferentially connected to the other, merely by their presence in his belief system.

The premise of the epistemic regress argument is that *all justification must be inferential*. This premise, I submit, is built upon *two assumptions*: *the first* is that the only way a belief can justify another belief is inferentially; *the second* is that it is not just that a reason to believe *always seems* to be something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns, but that a reason to believe *always is* something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. They interact in such a manner: the first assumption does not entail that a belief cannot justify itself, although the second does; the second assumption does not entail that there is only one way in which a belief can justify another belief, although the first does. Ergo, all justification must be inferential. And given that premise the Agrippan sceptic argues for the truly global, radically sceptical conclusion that justified belief is impossible.

Let us say that we accept those two assumptions. To approach this conclusion from the non-sceptical side of the dialectic, clearly for the epistemologist 'The obvious problem is to say how this regress of levels or stages of justification, each dependent on the next [*re a's* beliefs that  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$ , etc.], finally ends'.<sup>32</sup> There would appear to be *three* options, each of which, and in their own way, the Agrippan sceptic points out to be unsatisfactory in providing for justified belief.

The first option would be that:

The final stage of any particular branch on the regress may invoke premise-beliefs for which no further reason or justification of any sort is available. In this case, it seems to follow that the epistemological tree structure, no matter how complicated and ramified it may be, offers no reason or justification for thinking that *any* of the component beliefs that are essentially dependent on those unjustified beliefs are true.... It tells us, in effect, only that some things would be true *if* other things were true, and that those other things would be true *if* still further things were true, and so on, ending with things that there is no reason to believe to be true.<sup>33</sup>

That is, (a), the regress of conditional justification finally terminates in  $a$ 's dogmatic belief that  $s$ , say, which itself bears no inferential connection to any epistemically prior belief that  $t$  that might serve to conditionally justify *it*. Therefore, all of  $a$ 's beliefs  $p$ ,  $q$ ,  $r$ , etc. are themselves unjustified, their conditional justification stemming from a belief which is itself unjustified.

The second option would be that:

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 119.

The final stage of the regress may invoke premise-beliefs that have occurred earlier in the structure, so that the justificational structure in effect loops back upon itself in some fashion. In this case, assuming again that all relevant justificatory relations are captured by the structure, the justification for all of the components of the structure is apparently either directly circular or else dependent on premise-beliefs that are justified only in a circular and apparently questionbegging manner. Thus such a justificational structure again seems to present no reason for thinking that any of the component beliefs are true.<sup>34</sup>

That is, (b), the regress of conditional justification is *paradoxical*, in that the justification of *a*'s belief that *p* 'logically presupposes *its own* epistemically prior justification'.<sup>35</sup>

The third and final option is (c), the regress of conditional justification continues on *infinitely*. At each stage the matter of the conditionality of the premise-beliefs constitutive of the structure is answered by invoking another set of premise-beliefs, and the matter of their conditionality is answered by invoking a further set of premise-beliefs, *ad infinitum*. (c), then, doesn't even attempt to arrest the regress of conditional justification. As opposed to (a) and (b), however, it is more difficult to pinpoint the exact problem with (c). The question is whether the infinite regress of conditional justification is *vicious* or *virtuous*, for unlike (a) where there is not even conditional justification afforded *a*'s beliefs that *p*, *q*, *r*, etc., and (b) where the conditional justification of *a*'s beliefs is undone by the paradoxical nature of the loop, at least in (c) *a*'s beliefs, all the infinite array of them, *are* conditionally justified. Often the epistemologist inclines toward the former: conditional justification just isn't non-conditional justification, which is what we need for instances of knowledge; therefore, the infinite regress of conditional justification is vicious. Conditional justification is just a placeholder for non-conditional justification.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, again, *a*'s beliefs *are* conditionally justified in virtue of being a member of such an infinite regress, so we cannot say that *a doesn't* know those beliefs, although we cannot, in parallel, say that he *does*. But whilst the fact that *a*'s beliefs are not non-conditionally justified in virtue of their membership of such an infinite regress is not decisive, this dilemma is certainly enough to make us look elsewhere than (c) for a way to elude the regress of conditional justification, thus treating (c) as something like the option of last resort.

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, p. 119.

<sup>35</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 24, original emphasis.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Dancy, *ICE*, p. 56.

And the way to begin to do that is to challenge the premise of the epistemic regress argument. As it stands its conclusion is that, if all justification must be inferential then justified belief is impossible. But I have suggested that that premise itself is built from two assumptions: firstly, the assumption that the only way a belief can justify another belief is inferentially; and secondly, that a reason to believe is always something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. So what is to be challenged is either—or both—of those two assumptions. But before turning to such challenges let us clarify the trilemma that underlies this argument, indeed, that is common to all arguments that come under the banner of the Agrippan problematic. For as we shall see the Agrippan sceptic in fact argues for the second of those assumptions, although that argument begs the question, and given his originary resources simply cannot argue for the first.

## §2.2 The Agrippan Problematic II: The General Argumentative Methodology of the Agrippan Sceptic

Clarifying what exactly lies behind the trilemma is very important. I have suggested that the premise of the epistemic regress argument, i.e., that all justification must be inferential, appears to be founded upon two assumptions. The first assumption is that the only way in which a belief can justify another belief is inferentially, and the second assumption is that a reason to believe is always something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. Now, I suggest that the Agrippan sceptic argues for that second assumption but that his relationship to the first is rather ambivalent. Indeed, I take it that he cannot argue for it given the resources that he begins with. However, I also take it that his argument for the second assumption is question-begging and that, if he attempts to shore it up, then he may be able to argue for the first assumption. I shall comment on this thought below.

At first blush we might think the epistemic regress argument to be operating as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the premise that all justification must be inferential—an assumption for the sake of proving it false. Indeed, those who employ that argument as an argument for foundationalism, instead of situating it within the context of the Agrippan problematic, may be taken to understand it in this way. Yet I take it that the Agrippan sceptic really thinks that all justification must be inferential, even if he cannot necessarily support this conclusion. Williams writes:

The idea behind [the Agrippan problematic]... is devastatingly simple. When any proposition, advanced as a claim to knowledge, is challenged, there are only three ways of responding:

- 1 Refuse to respond, i.e. make an undefended assumption [*re* (a.)].
- 2 Repeat a claim earlier in the argument, i.e. reason in a circle [*re* (b.)].
- 3 Keep trying to think of something new to say, i.e. embark on an infinite regress [*re* (c.)].

Since there is no fourth option, any attempt to justify a given belief will fail, either by being interminable or by terminating in an evidently unsatisfactory way. It is hard to imagine a sceptical argument starting with more minimal presuppositions than this. All that appears to be taken for granted is that any claim can always be challenged: a request for justification *can* always be entered, even though it normally might not be.<sup>37</sup>

Understood in this light, no assumption of the epistemic distinctness of a reason to believe some proposition, nor therefore of the three elements I have identified as constitutive of such a reason, need be made by the Agrippan sceptic. Their epistemic distinctness is entailed by the fact 'that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged'. For if any claim to knowledge can always be challenged then that challenge can only be met by making another claim to knowledge that in some way justifies that first, challenged claim, i.e., by the provision of an epistemically distinct reason to believe the propositional content of that first, challenged claim. Thus, if we accept his claim that any claim to knowledge always can be challenged then the Agrippan sceptic has an argument for the second assumption underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument. I now want to make two essential points concerning the Agrippan sceptic's claim that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged: (a), that it is that claim which leads to the ostensibly paradoxical observation at the heart of the Agrippan problematic; and, most importantly, (b), that that claim cannot be used to argue for the first assumption on its own, and that that claim is question-begging.

(a) *The generation of the ostensibly paradoxical observation.* The ostensibly paradoxical observation at the heart of the Agrippan problematic is that we require empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge, and yet we cannot assume any empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge. The second clause, i.e., that we cannot assume any empirical knowledge in order to explain empirical knowledge, is an explicit statement of the first aspect of the generality demanded by the traditional epistemological project in any suitable explanation of the possibility of empirical

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<sup>37</sup> Williams, *UD*, p. 60.



knowledge. Therefore, I take that clause as given. The first clause, however, i.e., that we require empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge, must be rejected or explained away if we are to escape the ostensibly paradoxical observation—if we are to show that it is *only* an *ostensibly* paradoxical observation or, indeed, *no paradox at all*. Having introduced the central claim of the Agrippan sceptic, i.e., that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged, we now have, I submit, the tools to generate that first clause.

How? For now, let us accept the claim of the Agrippan sceptic that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged. It is that claim, coupled with those two points concerning a reason to believe some proposition I made in §1.1, which enables the generation of that first clause. Those two points were: (i), given that the intuitive purpose of knowledge is the belief of truth a reason to believe must be unconditionally indicative of the truth of the proposition it concerns; and (ii), that an explanation of how empirical knowledge is possible would have failed to respect the first aspect of the generality demanded by the traditional epistemological project—so would be no explanation at all—if it did not allow us to recognise a reason to believe some proposition as a reason to believe that proposition.

Those two points interact in such a manner: to recognise a reason to believe some proposition as a reason to believe that proposition it must be possible to recognise that that reason is indicative of the truth of that proposition. But to recognise a reason to believe as being indicative of the truth of some proposition it must be the case that that reason to believe that proposition itself is recognisable as true, or likely to be true—that reason to believe that proposition must itself be an instance of knowledge. But note that their conjunction implies nothing about whether a reason to believe must always be epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns, i.e., that believing some proposition might be a reason to believe that proposition in itself. It is the Agrippan sceptic's claim, then, that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged, which entails that a reason to believe some proposition must always be something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. The point being that that challenge is a *bare challenge*, so to speak, which does not imply that a claim to knowledge isn't actually correct in any way, just that it can be challenged because it is a claim to knowledge. And if that thought is intelligible—if it is intelligible that a claim to knowledge can always be challenged because it is a claim to knowledge—then a reason to believe some proposition must always be something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns.

The first clause of the ostensibly paradoxical observation at the heart of the Agrippan problematic is therefore generated like this: if it is intelligible that a claim to knowledge can always be challenged because it is a claim to knowledge, then a reason to believe some proposition must always be something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns; a reason to believe some proposition must itself be an instance of knowledge; if a reason to believe some proposition must always be something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns, and a reason to believe that proposition must itself be an instance of knowledge, then a claim to knowledge can only be justified by another claim to knowledge. Therefore, knowledge is required to explain knowledge. Of course, however, that is not the first clause of the ostensibly paradoxical observation, for that clause specifically concerns *empirical* knowledge. What we have generated here is the first clause of the even more encompassing paradox that we require knowledge to explain knowledge, yet we cannot assume any knowledge to explain knowledge. Now, we shall turn to the specifically empirical understanding of that ostensibly paradoxical observation in §2.4, where I will introduce the problem of the criterion; however, before that we must turn to the question of whether it is really paradoxical in any case.

(b) *The Agrippan sceptic's claim that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged cannot be used as is to argue for the first assumption and is, moreover, question-begging.* How is the trilemma related to the ostensibly paradoxical observation? One way to understand their relationship is to take the trilemma as a parallel of the ostensibly paradoxical observation and not a consequence of it nor contribution to it. How so? The trilemma may be understood as accruing to *particular* instances of claims to empirical knowledge, the ostensibly paradoxical observation to a *general* explanation of its possibility. On this understanding of their relationship the connection between the two is (c), i.e., the infinite regress of reasons to believe. For (c) can be understood as what makes the ostensibly paradoxical observation a paradox and not a contradiction: whilst we may not be able to explain how empirical knowledge is possible, we *may* nonetheless have it—and *without assuming any empirical knowledge*.

But I suggest that there is another way to understand that relationship, one which begins from the idea that the ostensibly paradoxical observation is in fact a *necessary description*. This is, essentially, to *historicise* the ostensibly paradoxical statement: we wouldn't be wondering about the possibility of empirical knowledge if we didn't think we had it, therefore, if it turns out that we do have it—if we explain its possibility—we

will have in fact used empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge and, moreover, required empirical knowledge to explain its possibility. This does not entail, however, that the explanation we provide will have assumed any empirical knowledge to explain its possibility: *we* will have used such knowledge, *the explanation* shall not have. The point being that explaining things, including empirical knowledge, is something that we do—a *practical activity* in which the epistemologist participates. And a very important corollary of this thought is that justifying might also be something that we do (recall the connection intimated between explaining and justifying in the introduction). It is perhaps not just that *a belief* justifies another belief, but that *we* justify that other belief by making the connection between it and that former belief—in matters of justification what is at issue may also be *the epistemic conduct* of the epistemic subject and not only the epistemic relation between beliefs. This is, essentially, *the extended*, so to speak, non-traditional understanding of what it means for a belief to be justified which I have alluded to on various occasions.

These thoughts complicate the relationship between the trilemma and the ostensibly paradoxical observation. I suggest that, in fact, the Agrippan sceptic must take it that the trilemma contributes to the ostensibly paradoxical observation, such that it is not to be understood as a parallel of it at the level of particular instances of claims to empirical knowledge, although it is pitched at that level. The thought here is that we set out to justify some particular claim to empirical knowledge and come up against the three options of the regress, and then the ostensibly paradoxical observation is a corollary of the fact that (c) cannot actually or properly be rejected. For it may just be the case that the ostensibly paradoxical statement is simply a necessary description of how we both are able and must go about explaining the possibility of empirical knowledge, and then there is no need for the Agrippan sceptic's claim that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged to generate it. That is, perhaps a reason to believe some proposition *just is* always epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns, but that this is not epistemically problematic at all. This is suggestive of the fact that, for the Agrippan sceptic's claim that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged to be considered as generative of the first clause of the ostensibly paradoxical statement, then it must be something about that claim which mandates that the options we face when attempting to set out to justify some particular claim to empirical knowledge are (a)—(c), i.e., that the only way a belief can justify another belief is inferentially.

For, if we accept that that claim mandates that a reason to believe some proposition must always be something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns, it is only if we in addition accept that the justification of one belief by another belief must be inferential that the trilemma looms and, moreover, we have seen no reason to suppose that, because a reason to believe some proposition must be epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns, and because that reason to belief that proposition must itself be an instance of knowledge, the only way that that reason to believe that proposition can be epistemically related to that proposition is inferentially. If that first assumption is to be defended, then, it must be something about the Agrippan sceptic's claim that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged which must therefore mandate that the justification of one belief by another belief must always be inferential. Yet nothing about that claim, as it is, does mandate this because it does not set down any constraints concerning how a claim to knowledge is to be *defended*. For instance, perhaps what is to be defended is sometimes the epistemic conduct of an epistemic subject and not the epistemic relation between beliefs. I think this reflects what we might call 'a blind spot' in the Agrippan problematic.

As it goes I think this argument is fine, but the waters surrounding this issue, i.e., whether the Agrippan sceptic's claim that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged can itself be challenged, are even muddier. For we have effectively already rejected the Agrippan sceptic's claim that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged. In §1.2 it was suggested that such a claim 'amounts to an assertion that one cannot answer the question 'How do you know you are in pain?' by simply saying 'Because I am in pain'', which we described as begging the question. And again—and an example we shall focus on—can my claim to know—my assertion—that 'I think' be challenged in a similar manner? That is, can that claim to knowledge be challenged without recourse to more philosophical baggage than the radically sceptical argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic? For the Agrippan sceptic takes it that he is licensed to challenge any claim to knowledge for no other reason than that it is simply a claim to knowledge.

At this juncture it is surely important to highlight the fact that such a putative instance of empirical knowledge as my claim to know that 'I think'—for as I indicated in the introduction I do regard it as an instance of empirical knowledge—concerns a deliverance of 'inner' and not 'outer' sense. As such, and as also indicated there, it normally falls outside the ambit of the subject-matter in regards to which the traditional

epistemological project, at least as most commonly attempted, has been conducted. That is, the fact that it does not concern a deliverance of 'outer' sense is normally taken to disbar it from making a contribution to that project. Here, then, the invidious distinction between 'outer' and 'inner' sense I further mooted in the introduction is making itself felt.

It has been *philosophico*-historically common to take it that the deliverances of 'outer' and 'inner' sense concern two fundamentally different domains of objects—the mind-independent and the mind-dependent. And in parallel to this distinction the claim that we have unfettered access to the latter, but problematic access to the former, has often been tendered. That is, when I experience myself as having the occurrent belief that 'There is a Martian in front of my eyes' I am directly experiencing the object which is that belief of mine, but when I experience myself as looking at the Martian in front of my eyes which prompted that belief it is often thought that I am *not directly experiencing* that Martian. Indeed, the thought goes that if I am directly experiencing anything in that latter case it is a *visual appearance* of there being a Martian in front of my eyes.

And so for the epistemological case as well. Say that I claim knowledge of the fact that there is a Martian in front of my eyes. In such a case it is not question-begging for the Agrippan sceptic to ask me to justify my claim. This is because my belief that 'There is a Martian in front of my eyes' may very well be false for whatever reason: my perceptual capacities are *fallible*. But say that I claim knowledge of the fact that I believe that 'There is a Martian in front of my eyes'. The thought has often been broached, the Cartesian problematic aside, that my belief that 'I believe that 'There is a Martian in front of my eyes'' cannot be false, i.e., that my introspective capacities are *infallible*.<sup>38</sup> If that is the case then it is question-begging for the Agrippan sceptic to ask me to justify my claim. Which is to say: in certain cases it is apparently unintelligible for the Agrippan sceptic to challenge a claim to knowledge simply because it is a claim to knowledge.

We might ask how we can have such infallible introspective access to the mind-dependent, and on examination that claim is to be disputed as we shall see, but certainly—and *specifically*—in the case of my claiming to know that 'I think' it seems question-begging for the Agrippan sceptic to ask me to justify that claim, as I can *only*

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<sup>38</sup> For the qualification 'the Cartesian problematic aside' cf. Bernard Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry*, (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1978), pp. 184—213.

make that claim by thinking.<sup>39</sup> The point being that if I understand what the proposition ‘I think’ *means*, in claiming that I know that ‘I think’ *I make that proposition true*. Let us say, then, in regards to my claim to know that ‘I think’, that since the Agrippan sceptic is not questioning my very understanding of the propositions I claim to know we have identified an instance of empirical knowledge which he *cannot* challenge.

Now certainly my claim to know that ‘I think’ is a claim of introspective knowledge on my part, though empirical for all that. We should ask two questions at this point: what does this entail for the Agrippan problematic? and how has this helped with the traditional epistemological project, i.e., the attempt to explain how empirical knowledge is possible without assuming any empirical knowledge? To take the latter first: it must still be explained how I can understand the proposition that ‘I think’, and this may very well involve other empirical knowledge, so clearly we cannot rest satisfied with having identified an instance of empirical knowledge which cannot be challenged by the Agrippan sceptic in an attempt to explain how empirical knowledge is possible. On the other hand, this would nonetheless seem to have ramifications for the Agrippan problematic. It suggests that the Agrippan sceptic’s claim that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged is question-begging—we need not accept it without argument—at least when that challenge is as bare as he makes it out to be, i.e., simply because a claim to knowledge has been made.

Does this not just lead to the dissolution of the Agrippan problematic? Not exactly. Whilst much of the epistemological force of the Agrippan problematic would seem to be accrued from the fact that it masquerades as being as intuitive as is possible—the Agrippan sceptic purports to *only* make the claim that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged—there is nothing to stop him from making certain further assumptions to defend that claim against the thought that there are some claims to knowledge which he cannot challenge just because they are claims to knowledge. One such might be to amend his own problematic to that of the Cartesian sceptic. Another would be to assume a certain semantics, one which makes it intelligible how he can challenge my claim to know that ‘I think’, i.e., one which does allow him to question my understanding of that proposition. And it might conceivably be the case that the amendment of the Agrippan problematic to the Cartesian problematic, or the assumption of a certain semantics, enables both the defence of the second and the first assumptions which underlie the premise of the epistemic regress argument. However, I propose to ignore this thought, and I take my professed ignorance here to be principled:

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 73—74.

although there is nothing to stop the Agrippan sceptic doing this it does defeat the purpose of his claim to the intuitiveness of his problematic.

I have now suggested that the Agrippan sceptic's claim that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged can be used to generate *neither* of the two assumptions underlying the epistemic regress argument. This means that the trilemma might not be exhaustive of the options because either: (i), there is more than one way in which a belief can justify another belief, i.e., inferential connection between beliefs is not the only epistemic relation which may obtain between them; or (ii), a reason to believe some proposition is *not* always something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. Moreover, because the Agrippan sceptic cannot now generate the second assumption, i.e., that a reason to believe some proposition must always be something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns, he further cannot now generate the first clause of the ostensibly paradoxical observation. But does the rejection of one or other—perhaps both—of those assumptions offer up any other options concerning how empirical knowledge might be structured?

At this point it seems apt to turn to what epistemologists have actually done in regards to these two assumptions in attempting to undermine the Agrippan problematic. Foundationalism explicitly challenges the second assumption; orthodox coherentism effectively neither, simply modifying the first. On the other hand, I have made intimations towards a non-traditional understanding of how a belief is justified above. The story I shall tell for the remainder of the thesis is one in which the epistemologist's reaction to the Agrippan problematic is connected to his theory of concept-acquisition and accompanying semantics. The story, in its essentials, goes like this: the foundationalist challenges the second assumption underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument, however both his fundamental understanding of the notion of non-inferential justification, as well as his abstractionist theory of concept-acquisition and atomistic semantics, are to be objected to (see §§3.1—4.2). The coherentist accepts the most obvious alternative semantics, i.e., a holistic semantics, yet he tells no story concerning how we come by our concepts, and so fails to see that he can challenge the second assumption via such a theory. He thus finds himself in the no man's land of challenging neither of the assumptions underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument (see §§5.1—5.2). Finally I turn to Sellars, who explicitly questions that first assumption and tells a story of sufficient depth concerning how we come by our concepts which backs this challenge up (see §§6.1—6.6).

The dialectical movement, then, is from challenging that second assumption underlying the epistemic regress argument to challenging that first assumption underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument. In the midst of this I take it that each of the applications of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic has a moral which a workable picture of empirical justification must satisfy. And note that if we are not challenging the second assumption, i.e., that a reason to believe some proposition is always something epistemically distinct from a belief in the proposition it concerns, then the first clause of the ostensibly paradoxical observation can be generated; however, I have already intimated above how we might understand that observation—as being a necessary description of the way in which the traditional epistemological project has to be carried out.

Given that we need not accept either of the two assumptions which underlie the premise of the epistemic regress argument based on a simple consideration of the resources available to the Agrippan sceptic, we might ask why—epistemologico-historically—it has caused such problems? Without getting into the philosophico-historical details of the matter I think we might just simply say that those assumptions are hard to illustrate to be *invalid*, whether argued for by the Agrippan sceptic or not. For instance, the foundationalist as we shall deal with him is not concerned with empirical knowledge in general (as I delineated it in the introduction), but with empirical knowledge of the mind-independent, and given our fallibility in perceptual matters it is intuitively the case that empirical knowledge of the mind-independent *can always be challenged*. Therefore, if the foundationalist accepts the first assumption, i.e., that the only way in which a belief can justify another belief is inferentially, as he does, then he will face the Agrippan trilemma in any case: for both the assumptions underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument are now in place. Indeed, just because, given his argumentative resources, those assumptions cannot be argued for by the Agrippan sceptic, this fact does not in any way mean they are *not* hard to dislodge. Given this fact I will simply assume that to be the case *in general*, i.e., that those two assumptions *are* valid unless otherwise shown, and so the Agrippan trilemma to be in effect in regards to all its applications, for the remainder of this thesis.

### §2.3. Foundationalism and Coherentism

The most obvious and epistemologico-historically prevalent way to question the premise of the epistemic regress argument is by arguing that *not all* justification is or



must be inferential, although the only way in which a belief can justify another belief is inferentially. Which is, essentially, to question the second assumption underlying that premise, i.e., that a reason to believe is always something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. The foundationalist's central claim, then, is that a reason to believe some proposition is *not* always epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns, with certain specific permutations dependent upon the foundationalism under consideration, as we shall see (§§3.3—3.4). This has often been taken as or proposed to be the *lone* way to escape the regress of conditional justification, a thought which Bonjour highlights:

The only apparently remaining alternative is that though there is *some* sort of reason or justification for thinking that premise-beliefs of the final stage are true, this reason is not of the conditional or inferential sort we have been discussing and hence avoids invoking new premise-beliefs that would themselves be in need of justification.... Thus such beliefs, if they exist, might be said to be *unconditionally justified*.<sup>40</sup>

Or, as is more conventional, the 'premise-beliefs of the final stage' of the regress of conditional justification are *non-inferentially* justified. The foundationalist thus attempts to transform (a): instead of that regress terminating in the dogmatic assumption that *a*'s belief that *s* is justified, without that belief bearing an inferential connection to any epistemically prior belief that *t* which might serve to justify it, it terminates in *a*'s belief that *s* which is non-conditionally or non-inferentially justified—actually justified—without needing to be inferentially connected to any epistemically prior belief that *t*. Bonjour summarises this strategy thus:

the central thesis of epistemological foundationalism... is the twofold thesis: (a) that some empirical beliefs possess a measure of epistemic justification which is somehow immediate or intrinsic to them, at least in the sense of not being dependent, inferentially or otherwise, on the... justification of other empirical beliefs; and (b) that it is these "basic beliefs," as they are sometimes called, which are the ultimate source of justification for *all* empirical knowledge.<sup>41</sup>

This is a good synopsis of 'the central thesis' of foundationalism in that it is suitably non-committal concerning what *kind* of empirical beliefs can play the role of 'basic beliefs' and why.

I suggested in the introduction that the most common understanding of empirical knowledge was that one in which it is taken to concern the deliverances of 'outer' sense,

<sup>40</sup> Bonjour, 'The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism', p. 119, original emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, pp. 16—17, original emphasis.

i.e., as concerning the mind-independent. I shall not defend this understanding—I have already suggested that it leads to an invidious distinction between knowledge putatively gleaned from the deliverances of ‘outer’ and ‘inner’ sense—however since that is the manner in which the foundationalisms we shall discuss understand empirical knowledge that is what we shall cleave to in the proceeding. Such foundationalisms begin, then, by first specifying that the propositional contents of basic beliefs must *directly* concern mind-independent objects. Which is understandable: the observational evidence for empirical knowledge of the mind-independent must itself be of the mind-independent. Nonetheless, this has important consequences for what kinds of empirical belief can play the role of basic beliefs. There are two ways in which this can be done.

Consider again my belief that ‘There is a Martian in front of my eyes’. Its propositional content directly concerns the Martian apparently in front of my eyes, i.e., directly concerns a mind-independent object. If there is a Martian in front of my eyes, and let us assume that there is, then that proposition will be true and so possibly amount to an instance of knowledge. Moreover, it is an intuitive thought that in such a case the justification of that belief does not itself involve another belief or beliefs—it is at least part constituted by the Martian in front of me. *That belief is to be considered non-inferentially justified because it is not justified via inference from another belief, but via its interaction with that which it concerns.*

But, then, as suggested above, it often thought that I am not directly experiencing that Martian—that in such a case if I am directly experiencing anything it is a visual appearance of there being a Martian in front of my eyes. This thought is encouraged by the observation, again suggested above, that my perceptual capacities are fallible. For instance, that I can be mistaken in believing that ‘There is a Martian in front of my eyes’ because I am subject to an illusion—say that there is in fact a suitably Martian-like Moon-man in front of my eyes—or a hallucination—that I have ingested some hallucinatory drugs which have provided me with the visual appearance of a Martian in front of my eyes, when there is in fact nothing there at all (or nothing Martian-like there at all). Yet the case is often made that there must be something in common between those cases and that of a veridical experience of there being a Martian in front of my eyes: even if I am subject to some such illusion or hallucination of there being a Martian in front of my eyes when there in fact isn’t, and also in the veridical

case of their actually being a Martian in front of my eyes, in all three I am nonetheless having a *visual appearance* of a Martian in front of my eyes.<sup>42</sup>

This is suggestive of another way in which a basic belief's propositional content can concern a mind-independent object: it can do so *indirectly* via directly concerning an appearance of such an object. This is normally codified by qualifying the propositional content of my belief that 'There is a Martian in front of my eyes' with a 'looks to be/looks as if...', 'appears to be/appears as if...', 'seems to be/seems as if...', etc., locution. If I believe that 'There looks to be a Martian in front of my eyes' its propositional content does not directly concern the mind-independent, but instead 'is restricted to the deliverances of sense-experience alone and implies nothing about an independent world'.<sup>43</sup> Let us call such a belief an experiential belief, i.e., a belief whose propositional content directly concerns an appearance. But before it appears as if the foundationalist has retreated into empirical knowledge of the mind-dependent the claim is made that at least in some cases that visual appearance is directly caused by that which it concerns. This is to return us to Stroud's point that a person without functioning sense organs would at least appear to be denied access to the mind-independent and correspondingly, we might now infer, *appearances concerning the mind-independent*. Thus the connection between appearances and the mind-independent is maintained. That being the case, the foundationalist may also suggest that he can utilise experiential beliefs as basic beliefs. And in their case, those beliefs are to be considered non-inferentially justified because they are not justified via inference from another belief, but due to their interaction with their subject-matter, i.e., appearances.

It must be noted, however, that the epistemic regress argument in itself does not force the foundationalist to make a choice between these two proposed kinds of basic beliefs in his attempt at carrying through the traditional epistemological project in regards to empirical knowledge of the mind-independent. For it makes no claim concerning *how* justified a basic belief must be. And such an issue is not within its ambit because the Agrippan sceptic obviously thinks that there can be no such thing as a non-inferentially justified, basic belief.

But having introduced foundationalism let us leave the substantive issue of which of those two proposed kinds of basic belief the foundationalist should choose to

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<sup>42</sup> This need not be accepted, committing the foundationalist as it does to a questionable position in the philosophy of perception, i.e., what might be called an 'indirect realism'. However, since nothing effectively hangs on the issue of how the foundationalist conceives of perception I shall not question the assumption of such a theory.

<sup>43</sup> Barry Stroud, 'Epistemological Reflection on Knowledge of the External World', p. 130, in Stroud, *Understanding Human Knowledge*, pp. 122–138.

the side for the moment. I now wish to make some clarifications concerning the scope of my investigation, and specifically clarifications in regards to the scope of our involvement with foundationalism.

It is often noted that there are two problems with foundationalism. The first is the one we are interested in: how or whether it escapes the Agrippan problematic. The second is more of a *pragmatic problem*, so to speak. It concerns the transition that must necessarily be made from the foundationalist's basic beliefs to *the superstructure* of inferentially justified empirical beliefs—empirical knowledge of the mind-independent—which they are 'the ultimate justification for'. As Bonjour writes:

The main issue [concerning the transition between the foundation and the superstructure]... is whether it is possible on the basis of the foundation specified by such a position to provide an adequate justification for the other beliefs that we ordinarily regard as justified, or at least for a reasonably high proportion of such beliefs. A foundationalist view that falls seriously short in this area will itself amount to a fairly severe version of scepticism.<sup>44</sup>

For instance, say for whatever reason that the foundationalist must take his basic beliefs to be of the latter of the two proposed kinds specified above, i.e., to have as their subject-matter appearances. If the foundationalist cannot illustrate a suitable justificatory inference from such beliefs to beliefs which directly concern the mind-independent then that threatens to forever cut us off from the mind-independent in the radically sceptical sense that we cannot even have justified belief concerning it. Successfully specifying a foundation of basic beliefs at that level may therefore be something of a pyrrhic victory. But this is *not* our topic: we are interested in the explanation of how empirical knowledge is possible as compounded by the applications of the trilemma at the heart of the Agrippan problematic, like the epistemic regress argument, which dictate that there can be no structure of empirical justification, and so no structure of empirical knowledge, and not whether, having identified some things we do know, and so having structured some aspect of or domain within our empirical knowledge, we can get to other things which we take ourselves to know. In a sense, the former is sufficient for us: to be able to define a structure of empirical knowledge, even one of slight extension, would effectively amount to our explaining the possibility of empirical knowledge. In regards to foundationalism, then, we are only concerned with whether we *can* identify *actual basic beliefs* and nothing more.

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<sup>44</sup> Bonjour, 'The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism', p. 120.

But whilst foundationalism is the most epistemologico-historically common way to attempt to escape the regress of conditional justification highlighted by the epistemic regress argument, we must also recognise another response. This response attempts to transform (b). Adherents to this position do not dispute the first assumption which underlies the premise of the epistemic regress argument, i.e., that the only way in which a belief can justify another belief is inferentially. Nor do they dispute, as the foundationalist does, the second assumption underlying that premise, i.e., that a reason to believe is always something epistemically distinct from a belief in the proposition it concerns. In fact, in a sense, they do not dispute *the premise* of that argument at all. Instead, they dispute the implicit claim of that premise which seems to entail that we *must* conceive of inferential justification as *linear*. They argue that, whilst it is the case that all justification *is* inferential, ‘inferential justification, despite its linear appearance, is essentially systematic or holistic in character: beliefs are justified by being inferentially related to other beliefs in the overall context of a coherent system’.<sup>45</sup> Thus epistemologists who hold such a position are called ‘coherentists’. Their thought is that, if we take inferential justification as ‘systematic or holistic in character’ we can avoid the paradoxical nature of (b): *a*’s belief that *p* *does* contribute to its own justification, but that is only ‘in the overall context of a coherent system’, and this somehow eludes the charge of circularity levelled at (b). It is because the coherentist does not object to either of the two assumptions which underlie the premise of the epistemic regress argument that I said in the introduction to this chapter that he was ‘between two worlds’. For we should really understand him as moving towards questioning that first assumption, just not going far enough, as we shall see below.

Perhaps the most apt way of characterising this position in general terms is to say that the coherentist takes the Agrippan sceptic, in pushing the epistemic regress argument, to have *miss*-located the true locus of inferential justification: it is not *primarily* at the level of particular empirical beliefs but at the level of a *system* of empirical beliefs—the latter is the fundamental *unit* of justification. Inference occurs between belief systems and not beliefs; in fact, beliefs are only *derivatively* justified by their membership within such a system. A belief is justified *iff it increases the coherence of a system of beliefs*, otherwise it should be rejected; the *more* coherent such a system the greater the degree of justification devolved upon its constituent beliefs. The fundamental notion of coherentism, then, is that of coherence itself, i.e., the

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<sup>45</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 90.

epistemically salient characterisation of how the properties of a belief system as a whole devolve justification on its constituent beliefs.

Simply put, there are a great many problems with even getting this position off the ground. As Bonjour writes:

At first glance, however, [coherentism] seems to be subject to a number of crushing objections, even if the quite problematic holistic and nonlinear conception of justification is tentatively allowed. The most standard of these objections are the following three (which are obviously closely related): First, no matter how high the standard of coherence is set, it seems clear that there will be many, probably infinitely many, systems of beliefs which will satisfy it and between which such a coherence theory will be unable to choose in any epistemically nonarbitrary way. (And any consistent empirical belief which is not internally coherent will be a member of some of those systems.) Second, such a view seems to deprive empirical knowledge of any *input* from or contact with the nonconceptual world, making it extremely unlikely that it will accurately describe that world. If justification depends only on the internal relations between the components of the system, then any agreement with the external world would be purely coincidental.... Third, such a coherence theory will seemingly be unable to establish an appropriate connection between justification and truth unless it interprets truth as long-run coherence.... This is precisely what the idealist proponents of the coherence theory tended to do, but such a view is nonetheless extremely implausible.<sup>46</sup>

Nonetheless, like with the issue concerning the transition between the foundation and the superstructure in regards to foundationalism, I will ignore these three problems. That might seem odd since we are concerned with the possibility of empirical knowledge. For instance, how can we explain the possibility of empirical knowledge if we are denying 'any *input* from or contact with the nonconceptual world'? But to make the point now in order to forestall any objections: I shall argue that the very notion of coherence is question-begging. That is, I shall argue that coherence is actually foundationalism in disguise. In regards to an attempt to carry through the traditional epistemological project no epistemically salient account of the notion of coherence can be given without the importation of a foundationalist element and thus the breakdown of any claim to holistic inferential justification. Therefore, if foundationalism is to be rejected, then so is coherentism.

#### §2.4. The Agrippan Problematic III: The Problem of the Criterion

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 25, original emphasis.

In §2.2 I illustrated how the first clause of the all encompassing, ostensibly paradoxical observation that we require knowledge to explain knowledge, and yet we cannot assume any knowledge to explain knowledge, was to be generated by the Agrippan problematic. Now, whilst I there questioned that generation in the sense that the Agrippan sceptic cannot argue for it without begging the question, I also stated that we would accept the assumptions underlying the Agrippan trilemma as valid unless shown to be otherwise. That being the case then the ostensibly paradoxical observation can be considered a product of that latter fact (again as specified in §2.2), so let us assume that it is in effect. Here I wish to turn to the specifically empirical understanding of that ostensibly paradoxical observation which we are most concerned with (recall the end of (a) in §2.2). And I shall do this by illustrating the most egregious case of the requirement that we need empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge, and yet we cannot assume any empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge. This is that application of the Agrippan sceptic's general argumentative methodology which I have called 'the problem of the criterion'.

Now, as reiterated above, in §1.1 I offered a schematic of both the composition of a reason to believe *qua* indicative of the truth of the proposition it concerns, as well as isolating the elements of it which enabled its recognition as a reason to believe *qua* indicative of the truth of the proposition it concerns. In regards to my belief that 'Martians exist' I suggested that the following conjunction of beliefs might act as a reason to believe that proposition believed:

- a. In regards to their content the theses are indicative of the likely truth of the proposition that 'Martians exist' (belief).
- b. If those theses themselves are likely to be true, then the proposition that 'Martian exist' is likely to be true (by (a.)).
- c. Those theses exhibit the epistemic property of being formulated by a noted scientist (belief).
- d. If those theses exhibit the epistemic property of being formulated by that noted scientist, then those theses are likely to be true (belief).
- e. Therefore, those theses are likely to be true (by (c.) and (d.)).
- f. Therefore, the proposition that 'Martians exist' is likely to be true (by (b.) and (e.)).

That aspect of such reasoning we are concerned with here is (d.), i.e., the epistemic principle ‘If those theses exhibit the epistemic property of being formulated by a noted scientist, then those theses are likely to be true’ which licenses me to take my putative evidence in general in favour of the proposition that ‘Martians exist’ as actual evidence in general in favour of that proposition. That is, as suggested above, the problem of the criterion is concerned with the epistemic locus (IV.): the epistemic distinctness of the epistemic principle which licences an epistemic subject to take his putative evidence in general in favour of some proposition as actual evidence in general in favour of that proposition from the evidence in general in favour of that proposition.

Note that in §1.1 I stated without fanfare that (d.) was *an inductively inferred epistemic principle*. However, clearly that cannot always be the case in regards to such principles because surely *at least one* such principle is needed prior to my *ever* being able to take any putative evidence in general in favour of a proposition as actual evidence in general in favour of a proposition, i.e., for me to even be able to make such an inductive inference. Williams writes:

Suppose that, instead of offering some particular piece of evidence, I back up a given belief by citing its supposedly authoritative source (“the senses,” “reason,” etc.) or by claiming it meets some condition that distinguishes justified beliefs from unjustified [*sic* should say ‘beliefs’ again] (e.g. increasing the overall coherence of one’s belief-system): surely I can be challenged to explain why beliefs issuing from that source, or meeting that condition, are likely to be true. Again, we face three options: we can refuse to explain; we can justify our reliance on a given source or standard by appeal to the same source or standard (“I know by observation that observation is reliable,” “A coherence theory of justification maximises coherence”): or we can try to cite a different source (“I can show *a priori* that observation is reliable/that coherence is truth-conducive”). I suppose, however, that given our limited epistemological ingenuity, there is not much chance of our embarking on an infinite regress: circularity and mere assumption are the chief dangers here.<sup>47</sup>

Note his claim at the end: ‘there is not much chance of our embarking on an infinite regress: circularity and mere assumption are the chief dangers here’. This is indicative of the difference between the epistemic regress argument, i.e., the Agrippan sceptic’s general argumentative methodology as applied to the epistemic locus (I.), and that argumentative methodology as applied to the epistemic loci (II.)—(IV.). The former is a much more formal, abstract application of that argumentative methodology, one which is not subject-matter specific. It is only once some kind of workable solution to that

<sup>47</sup> Williams, *UD*, p. 61—62, original emphasis.



argument has been tendered that we can properly turn to the subject-matter we are concerned with, i.e., empirical knowledge. And it is then that we come face-to-face with the other three applications of that methodology, culminating with the problem of the criterion. So note, then, that I am suggesting that the epistemic regress argument has methodological priority over the other applications of the argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic—the epistemologist attempts to answer that argument first. In any case, Williams's claim is to be understood in light of the fact that some such substantive relativisation has now been made to that subject-matter—given that relativisation there is not much chance of embarking on an infinite regress in regards to the problem of the criterion.

The problem expressed in the passage above is indicative of the fact that *we simply have to*, at some point, make an assumption in regards to the explanation of empirical knowledge—that is the moral, I take it, of the problem of the criterion. And what the Agrippan sceptic enjoins us to think is that that assumption must be of an instance of empirical knowledge. Given that he cannot inductively infer his ultimate empirical epistemic principle—*his criterion*—the epistemologist is faced with either justifying that ultimate empirical epistemic principle by circular appeal to itself, or justifying it by appeal to some other, non-empirical or *a priori* source or standard, but how does he then justify *that*, for obviously it is no use appealing to the ultimate empirical epistemic principle which the latter has been invoked to justify. In fact, I think we should actually reject this second option. As Stroud writes:

As a way of explaining how we know the things we do, this [*re* the appeal to the *a priori*] merely postpones or expands the problem. It avoids the sceptical regress in sensory knowledge of the world by insisting that the basic 'principles' or presuppositions needed for such empirical knowledge do not themselves depend on empirical, sensory support. But that says only that those 'principles' are *not* known by experience; it does not explain how they are known. Merely being presupposed by our empirical knowledge confers no independent support. It has to be explained how we know anything at all *a priori*, and how in particular we know those very things we need for empirical knowledge. And then the old dilemma presents itself again. If our *a priori* knowledge of those 'principles' is derived from something prior to them which serves as their evidential base [*re* are themselves inferred, whether deductively or inductively], it must be shown how the further 'principles' needed to take us from that base to the 'principles' in question could themselves be supported. If we assume from the outset that we do know some 'principles' *a priori*, not all of our *a priori* knowledge in general will have been explained. It would seem that *a priori* knowledge in general could be explained only in terms of something that is not itself *a priori* knowledge. But empirical knowledge cannot explain *a priori* knowledge—and it would be no help even if it could—so either we

must simply accept the unexplained fact that we know things a priori or we must try to explain it without appealing to any other knowledge at all.<sup>48</sup>

And note that if we do reject this second option then we have finally reached the ostensibly paradoxical observation as specifically concerning empirical knowledge: we require empirical knowledge, i.e., an ultimate empirical epistemic principle, to explain empirical knowledge, yet we cannot assume any empirical knowledge in order to explain empirical knowledge, and we cannot assume *any other knowledge either*. The derivation of the specifically empirical ostensibly paradoxical observation is thus to be understood as a product of the fact that an appeal to other knowledge is really of no help at all.

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<sup>48</sup> Stroud, 'Understanding Human Knowledge in General', pp. 108—109.

## **Chapter Three: Foundationalism and the Agrippan Problematic**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter I introduce the last two applications of the Agrippan trilemma, as well as two kinds of foundationalism, one in regards to each of those two applications. Those two applications obviously concern the remaining two epistemic loci I identified in §1.1, i.e., (II.) and (III.). We shall call these arguments ‘the evidential regress argument’ and ‘Bonjour’s argument’ respectively. In regards to the evidential regress argument I shall introduce the foundationalism termed ‘the appearance theory’, although, as we shall see, it fails to elude that argument. And even if it did, it shall be argued, it would in any case fail to elude Bonjour’s argument. The other foundationalism I introduce may be called ‘the sense-datum theory’. This appears to offer the best prospect for the foundationalist attempting to elude either of those two applications of the Agrippan trilemma (as well as the problem of the criterion it might be added), although once again it shall be suggested that it fails.

In the first section I present what I have called ‘the evidential regress argument’. This forces the foundationalist to opt for experiential beliefs as basic in that it demands that the evidence in favour of the propositional content of a basic belief *must be absolutely certain*, which simply cannot be the case in terms of beliefs whose propositional contents directly concern the mind-independent. I then present the appearance theory, which we should understand as the simplest possible response available for the foundationalist to that argument. Invoking certain pieces of linguistic evidence, the appearance theory argues that we cannot be wrong about how things appear to us.

In the next section (§3.2) I argue that our fallibility in perceptual matters also extends to cognitive matters—*our capacities in general are fallible*. That being the case we should not accept the appearance theorist’s argument. However, this leaves the job of explaining away those pieces of evidence the appearance theorist has invoked in defence of his position (a matter I turn to in §§4.1—4.2).

In the next section (§3.3) I present what I have called Bonjour’s argument. This suggests that the search for absolute certainty in regards to evidence in favour of some proposition is in any case not enough to escape the Agrippan problematic, for a reason to believe that such evidence *is* absolutely certain will still be required for a belief in the proposition that evidence concerns *to be acceptable as basic*. The appearance theorist

cannot reply to this argument. On the other hand, the sense-datum theorist may be able to: he argues that what in fact constitute the foundation of our empirical knowledge are, effectively, *appearances themselves*. That which is believed about *at the second level*, so to speak, *itself* constitutes the first level of our empirical knowledge and does *not* require justification.

In the final section of this chapter (§3.4) I argue that the sense-datum theorist may be understood as implying that there is in fact *a third assumption* underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument, i.e., that *only* beliefs have a justificational role to play in *an epistemic economy*, so to speak. But I also argue that the foundationalist who proffers such a theory finds himself faced with an inescapable dilemma, which is indicative of the fact that that supposed third assumption is in any case encompassed by the second assumption, i.e., that a reason to believe some proposition must always be something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. I finish this chapter by bringing up Sellars's own thoughts on the confusions of the sense-datum theory.

### §3.1. The Evidential Regress Argument and the Appearance Theory

To dive straight in, the evidential regress argument is well expressed by Dancy:

This [argument]... can best be understood by approaching it from a (very slight) knowledge of the probability calculus. In this calculus, probability is always assessed relative to evidence. We do not ask what the absolute probability of a hypothesis  $h$  (written  $P(h)$ ) would be. Instead we ask what the absolute probability of a hypothesis  $h$ 's conditional probability given evidence  $e$  (written  $P(h/e)$ ). The probability of  $h$  given  $e$  is expressed as correlations generally are, on a scale of 0 to 1. If  $P(h/e) = 0$ , then given  $e$   $h$  is certainly false. If  $P(h/e) = 1$ , then given  $e$ ,  $h$  is certainly true. If  $P(h/e) = 0.5$ , then it is as probable that  $h$  is true, given  $e$ , as that it is false, since  $P(h/e) + P(\sim h/e) = 1$  in the calculus.

The main point is that in assessing the probability of  $h$  given  $e$  we do not question  $e$ ; we assume temporarily that  $e$  is certain, and we ignore the chance of  $e$  not being true. But  $e$  itself has a probability relative to further evidence  $e'$ , and so on indefinitely. And unless we can find in the end a proposition or set of evidence  $e^n$  which has somehow in its own right the probability of 1, all these probabilities will have nothing to rest on. We need to find something certain which can function as the unquestioned evidence by appeal to which the probabilities of other things are to be assessed.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Dancy, *ICE*, p. 54—55, original emphasis.

This argument suggests that the evidence in favour of some proposition must ultimately be traced back to an item or items of evidence which are themselves certain, items which have in their own 'right the probability of 1', else all the items of evidence constitutive of that chain (regress) of *conditional* evidence will have 'nothing to rest on'—they will not even be *improbable*: their *actual* probability simply cannot be calculated. Now here Dancy is obviously treating the evidential regress argument as an argument for foundationalism, however his acknowledged inspiration for this argument, C. I. Lewis, implicitly treats it as an instance of the Agrippan trilemma.<sup>50</sup> The latter writes:

Again; if the statement of objective fact, in whatever degree it may have become already assured, is further significant—if it implies what could be further and empirically determined but is not strictly deducible from past and present findings—then always it signifies something verifiable but as yet unverified, and is, in corresponding measure, itself subject to theoretical uncertainty. We have concluded that all statements of objective fact do have this character. That conclusion being premised, it becomes essential to distinguish statements of the given and presently certain, as well as statements of terminating judgments which later experience may render certain, from such statements of objective fact. Otherwise it becomes impossible to assure objective truth as even probable. If what is to confirm the objective belief and thus show it probable, were itself an objective belief and hence no more than probable, then the objective belief to be confirmed would only be probably rendered probable. Thus unless we distinguish the objective truths belief in which experience may render probable, from those presentations and passages of experience which provide this warrant, any citation of evidence for a statement about objective reality, and any mentionable corroboration of it, will become involved in an indefinite regress of the merely probable—or else it will go around in a circle—and the probability will fail to be genuine. If anything is to be probable, then something must be certain. The data which eventually support a genuine probability, must themselves be certainties.<sup>51</sup>

Here Lewis clearly sets out options (b) and (c) of the Agrippan trilemma: 'Thus unless we distinguish the objective truths belief in which experience may render probable, from the presentations and passages of experience which provide this warrant, any citation of evidence for a statement about objective reality, and any mentionable corroboration of it, will become involved in an infinite regress of the merely probable—or *else it will go around in a circle*—and the probability will fail to be genuine' (I have italicised the mention of (b)). All that is needed to make explicit the trilemma at the heart of the evidential regress argument would be to add that there is of course the other

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

<sup>51</sup> C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, (La Salle: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1946) p. 186.

option (a), which in this case would amount to refusing to calculate the probability of some item of evidence in a regress of conditional evidence such that we cannot take anything which it is putatively conditional evidence in favour of as even improbable. This, then, is the Agrippan problematic in application to the second epistemic locus I identified in §1.1, i.e., (II.): the epistemic distinctness of the evidence in favour of that proposition from the proposition it concerns.

Let us bracket the suggestion of Lewis's own response to the evidential regress argument implied in phrases such as, e.g., 'those presentations and passages of experience which provide this warrant' or 'statements of the given and presently certain'; Lewis is a sense-datum theorist as we shall see in §3.3. Clearly Dancy and Lewis are here concerned with what we have called 'absolute certainty' (§1.2). For an item of evidence to have a probability of being true of 1 is for there to be no possible evidence against its being true. And since we are here considering foundationalism, the present response to this argument is already decided for us (as implied above): the foundationalist shall attempt to transform (a.)—he will suggest that he can identify basic beliefs the evidence in favour of which is absolutely certain. And note that the evidential regress argument is not simply suggesting that *some* of the items of evidence at the terminating points of a regress of conditional evidence must be absolutely certain. It is saying that *all* such items must be, since at a minimum a regress of conditional justification will consist of only *one* item of evidence.

Now, one thing we can note from the passage of Lewis's is his contention that 'objective belief' or 'statements of objective fact'—empirical beliefs whose propositional contents directly concern mind-independent objects and expressions thereof—are 'no more than probable'. Consider again my empirical belief that 'There is a Martian in front of my eyes'. If true, its propositional content directly concerns a mind-independent object, i.e., the Martian in front of my eyes. But given my fallibility in perceptual matters I cannot tell from my experience of there being a Martian in front of my eyes alone whether it is veridical—it *could be* veridical, yet it *might also be* an illusion or an hallucination. This dictates that simply because it is a belief about a mind-independent object it cannot have evidence in favour of its propositional content which is absolutely certain. The evidence in favour of the proposition that 'There is a Martian in front of my eyes' can only be indicative of the likely truth of that proposition.

The conclusion we should draw from these considerations is that empirical beliefs whose propositional contents directly concern mind-independent objects cannot play the role of basic beliefs if the evidence in favour of the propositions constitutive of

basic beliefs must be indicative of their certain truth. But the foundationalist only has two choices in regards to such basic beliefs, so by a process of elimination it must be the case that what I have called 'experiential beliefs', i.e., empirical beliefs whose propositional contents directly concern appearances of mind-independent objects play the role of basic beliefs. Empirical beliefs whose propositional contents are restricted to the deliverances of sense-experience alone and imply nothing about an independent world, i.e., experiential beliefs, must play the role of basic beliefs—they are epistemically prior to all other empirical beliefs.

But why should we regard the evidence in favour of the propositional contents of such experiential beliefs as absolutely certain? That evidence is to be considered an appearance itself, and the thought goes that we simply cannot be wrong about how things look or seem or appear to us. Unlike in the case of my belief that 'There is a Martian in front of my eyes', in regards to which there may or may not be a Martian in front of my eyes in virtue of which it is true, in the case of my belief that 'There looks to be a Martian in front of my eyes' what could I have mistaken for the visual appearance of their being a Martian in front of my eyes?

This thought becomes complicated, however, when the idea that an item of evidence must exhibit propositional structure is brought up, something which we have simply ignored up until now. The point being that only something which admits of truth or falsity can play the role of evidence and only something with propositional structure can admit of truth or falsity. So the simplest response for the foundationalist in regards to the evidential regress argument, without his attempting any ontological claims concerning the nature of appearances, is to posit that appearances are not in fact the evidence in favour of the propositional contents of experiential beliefs concerning them, but that those beliefs simply cannot be wrong—their propositional contents are that which is absolutely certain.

This, I take it, is the central claim of the appearance theorist. And he defends this claim initially by invoking a linguistic fact: what we shall call 'the non-iterative nature of looks-talk'. This can be inferred from statements—expressions—of empirical belief. Statements of objective fact, i.e., expressions of empirical belief in the mind-independent, which thus involve what we shall call 'is-talk'—an *existence* claim—can *always* be subjectively qualified. Consider my assertion that 'There is a Martian in front of my eyes'. To this assertion I can always add the subjective qualification '... or, at least, it *looks* (*appears*, *seems*, etc.) that way to me'. On the other hand, appearance statements, i.e., expressions of experiential belief, which thus involve looks-talk—an

*appearance* claim—cannot be qualified in such a manner. I cannot intelligibly assert that ‘It looks as though there looks to be a Martian in front of my eyes’. The appearance theorist takes this as indicative of the fact that we cannot be wrong concerning appearances. And as Williams comments:

There seems to be something right in the claim that we cannot be wrong about how things appear to us.... I can say ‘This tie looks green to me, but the light is a bit funny in here so perhaps it is really blue’. But I can’t say ‘This tie looks as if it looks green to me, but perhaps it really looks blue’. What would such a claim even mean?<sup>52</sup>

(And note, to avoid any confusion, that the statement ‘This tie looks green to me, but the light is a bit funny so perhaps it is really blue’ does not involve the subjective qualification of the assertion of the experiential belief ‘This tie looks green to me’. It instead involves something like its *objective qualification*, so to speak, i.e., questioning what colour the tie really *is*, as opposed to how it looks.)

Let us accept this claim for now. How does the appearance theorist get from it to the thought that experiential beliefs are non-inferentially justified, i.e., to the thought that they are fit to play the role of basic beliefs and thus halt the regress of conditional justification codified in the epistemic regress argument? Recall that the foundationalist objects to the second assumption underlying the premise of that argument, i.e., that a reason to believe some proposition is always something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. The appearance theorist suggests that, in regards to experiential belief, a reason to believe some proposition directly concerning an appearance is not epistemically distinct from belief in that proposition. And that is because that propositional content will be absolutely certain. Moreover, this devolves a corresponding epistemic property upon a belief in such a proposition: *infallibility*. That is, ‘If a proposition, being certain, has a probability of 1, then there is no chance that a belief in that proposition will be false; so the belief will be infallible’.<sup>53</sup> And it is a short step from a belief’s being infallible to the claim that it is therefore non-inferentially justified, i.e., basic. As Dancy writes:

An infallible belief would be justified but would not derive its justification from any relation in which it stood to other beliefs; it would not need any support from elsewhere. For surely a belief whose chances of being false are nil is unimpeachable. Nothing could reduce its probability, and hence there could be no reasons for supposing it false. So if there are any infallible beliefs we have no need to worry about the threatened regress of

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<sup>52</sup> M. Williams, *Problems of Knowledge*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 96. From hence, *PK*.

<sup>53</sup> Dancy, *ICE*, p. 55.



justification [*re* the epistemic regress argument]. Infallibility in the base will stop the regress.<sup>54</sup>

So the appearance theorist takes himself to have an answer to both the epistemic and evidential regress arguments—indeed, *some kind* of explanation of how empirical knowledge is possible. It is from a foundation of experiential beliefs that he proposes our empirical justification is structured, and the explanation for this is that their propositional contents are absolutely certain. But let us note straight away in regards to such a putative claim: what about Bonjour's argument? And, moreover, what about the problem of the criterion? Considering that what I have suggested as the composition of a reason to believe some proposition is only *partially* fulfilled by arguing that the evidence in favour of some proposition is not to be conceived of as epistemically distinct from that proposition itself, what has the appearance theorist to say about the fact that it would appear that an epistemic subject must in any case be able to recognise an experiential belief as infallible, i.e., have secondary evidence concerning the evidence in favour of it, and, indeed, have an epistemic principle which, in regards to such secondary evidence, licenses his acceptance of that belief as non-inferentially justified *and so basic*?

### §3.2. The Appearance Theory and Fallibility

Indeed, there are a variety of problems with the appearance theory which would suggest that any claim to have explained the possibility of empirical knowledge, at least in regards to the first aspect of the generality demanded by the traditional epistemological project, would be premature, not least of which are those presented by Bonjour's argument and the problem of the criterion. Yet since we have specified its central claim which is, in an extended form, that empirical beliefs whose propositional contents directly concern appearances are infallible because their contents are absolutely certain, it is most obvious to begin its critique by asking whether it even escapes the evidential regress argument.

Now, we might say that the appearance theorist denies that all our capacities are fallible. The question is, is such a denial plausible? For instance, imagine a situation in which I assert that 'There looks to be a red Martian in front of my eyes' in the standard conditions of visual perception, e.g., broad daylight, my not being on drugs or visually impaired in any manner, etc. That would be to give expression to an experiential belief

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 57.

of mine. Moreover, say that there really is a Martian in front of my eyes, you can see it too, but that it is in fact green. What are we to say about this disparity in colour between my expression of my experiential belief and the actual facts of the case? Have I or have I not in some sense made a mistake? And if I have, might that mean that that experiential belief is actually false?

The point of the invocation of standard conditions is that it should rule out, or at least limit, malfunctions of my perceptual capacities. So let us say that the appearance that I am expressing belief in the qualitative character of actually has the qualitative character of green and thus matches with objective reality. So what has gone wrong? Have I, via the fallibility of the cognitive capacities of mine involved in the process by which I have acquired the experiential belief that 'There looks to be a... Martian in front of my eyes' (where 'a...' is to signify the fact that we are not sure whether I believe that the Martian looks red or green), acquired a false experiential belief? The appearance theorist *cannot* allow that: in all cases like this my cognitive capacities must be infallible. But what can he say instead, since clearly a mistake has been made *somewhere* on my part. Dancy writes:

Champions of infallibility tend to concede that there is room for a mistake in the *description* of one's sensory states.... I might mistakenly describe my sensory state as being an experience of pink (things look pink to me there) when in fact it is an experience of orange. But this is dismissed as a merely verbal error. Of course I can be mistaken about the meanings of the words I use, but this will not show that I have any mistaken beliefs about my present sensory states. On the contrary, I must know how things look to me: my only error lies in choosing the wrong words to describe it. The description I use may be false, but I, the describer, am in this case infallible. My *beliefs*—the things I use words to express, with more or less success—must be true.<sup>55</sup>

That is, the appearance theorist argues that any suggestion of fallibility in regards to my empirical belief that 'There looks to be a... Martian over there' is to be attributed to my expression of that experiential belief. I can make a false assertion concerning the qualitative character of an appearance, but it cannot be the case that I falsely believe in what that qualitative character is—'On the contrary, I must know how things look to me'.

The appearance theorist defends this claim by shifting into the semantic register: he argues that it has to be the case that 'I must know how things look to me' if it is even to be possible that an assertion of mine concerning the qualitative character of an appearance can be false to begin with—if such an assertion can even be *meaningful*. So

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 58, original emphasis.

note the juncture we have now reached: we are turning to the semantics behind foundationalism. Moreover, note the implicit thought at work here: if experiential beliefs *must* play the role of basic beliefs in regards to empirical knowledge, then it cannot be the case that their propositional contents could be false else empirical discourse would be *meaningless*. It is possible to take this thought as relativised to that certain theory of concept-acquisition which I have claimed that the foundationalist is wedded to, but I actually think there is a kernel of truth to it which takes us beyond the borders of just that theory. The thought is that we must be able to illustrate that our empirical concepts actually hook onto the mind-independent in some way. Indeed, I take this to be the fundamental moral behind the evidential regress argument.

In any case, Dancy reconstructs such an argument like this:

[Firstly,... we may say that merely verbal errors can be corrected in standard ways. You can show me or remind me of the difference between orange and pink, perhaps by showing me a colour chart. When I have grasped this [difference]..., I can apply it to my present experience in order to see whether the experience is one of pink or of orange. But in order to do this I must be aware of the nature of the experience already, before I compare it with others in order to get the right words to describe it. I don't change my beliefs about how things look, only about how to describe them.

[Secondly,... although some comparison between my present experience and others is necessary for me to know what words to use in description, and although such comparison, especially in the case where the objects compared are a past and a present experience, is fallible (since memory is fallible), still the comparison is not what I am trying to express when I express my beliefs about my present experience alone. For my experience would have been this way no matter how other experiences might or might not have been. So the fallibility of the comparison does not extend to show the fallibility of the belief expressed; it only shows the fallibility of the expression of belief.

Finally, if a comparison is possible at all, this can only be because ultimately we have non-comparative knowledge of the two things compared. We compare them in order to see not what each is like but in what respects they are like each other.<sup>56</sup>

These three points are intertwined. The first suggests that we are to equate my very awareness of the qualitative character of an appearance with my experiential belief whose propositional content directly concerns that qualitative character. Otherwise, the appearance theorist continues, how could I even correct my assertion that 'There looks to be a red Martian in front of my eyes' when prompted, e.g., by your provision of a colour chart. The second then introduces the parallel claim that when I express an experiential belief whose propositional content directly concerns the qualitative

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, pp. 58—59.

character of an appearance a process of comparison is involved in which I compare the qualitative character of that appearance with the qualitative character of other appearances either current or remembered such that I can choose the correct words for that assertion concerning its qualitative character. Nonetheless, it is an experiential belief whose propositional content directly concerns *that* qualitative character of *that* appearance which I am trying to express, so again it cannot be that I am unaware—do not believe in—that qualitative character already. Moreover, the process of comparison allows us to pinpoint a locus of fallibility between my experiential belief whose propositional content directly concerns that qualitative character of that appearance and my expression of that belief. The final point then clarifies how we are to understand the propositional content of my experiential belief whose propositional content directly concerns that qualitative character of that appearance—it is constituted by non-comparative concepts necessarily specific or particular to the propositional content of that experiential belief in that qualitative character of that appearance.

What seems correct here is that it certainly is the case that when I express an experiential belief I am attempting to express belief in that qualitative character of that appearance, and this will, *in a sense*, involve non-comparative concepts (see §4.1). However, the appearance theorist confuses this thought. The question we must ask is what evidence the appearance theorist can provide for the existence of this non-comparative propositional content as *he* conceives of it, i.e., as *never* expressed. For he seems to take it that locutions such as ‘looks red’ and ‘looks green’, locutions constitutive of *the assertion* of an experiential belief, acquire their meaning via that process of comparison. Indeed, he must do this to maintain that it is that process which is the locus of fallibility between such an experiential belief and its expression. But if such non-comparative propositional contents are never *directly expressed*, so to speak, but always only after some such process of comparison, what *semantic contribution*, so to speak, do they make to those locutions?

Now, clearly there are two meanings to such locutions. There is the comparative one employed in such a statement as ‘X looks as red things normally look’, which may be false, and there is the non-comparative one employed in the statement ‘Red things normally look red’, which is a contingent *a priori* truth. Now, if the ‘looks red’ at work in this latter statement is the ‘looks red’ at work in the former it would be a *tautology*: ‘Red things normally look as red things normally look’. But the latter is not a tautology, and this fact needs to be explained away. This leads to the second linguistic fact which the appearance theorist invokes in defence of his position.

This can be seen by noting that the proper way to expand that second statement is to put it in the form of a biconditional: '*X is red iff x would look red to standard observers in standard conditions*'. Again, that is a contingent *a priori* truth, but it would be vacuous—tautologous—as a definition of *physical redness* if it was the case that 'red' on its right-hand side simply was the 'is red' of its left-hand side. That would amount to defining physical redness in terms of physical redness which is obviously unilluminating. What we want is a genuine way of expressing how physical redness normally looks such that we can pick out all and only physically red things. The appearance theorist takes it that the non-comparative meaning of the locution 'looks red' can help here. That is, if we understand the 'looks red' of the right-hand side in terms of the non-comparative meaning of that locution, then we can understand that biconditional as an *exceptionless* definition, i.e., a *definition*, of how redness normally looks. This is because that non-comparative meaning of the locution 'looks red' is supposed to encompass all the occasions in which something looks red to someone, and so *a fortiori* those occasions when something looks red to someone because it *is* red. So whilst this non-comparative meaning of the locution 'looks red' *never* occurs in an assertion of an experiential belief, otherwise the appearance theorist loses his right to identify the process of comparison as the locus of fallibility, there is nonetheless evidence for its existence in the sense that if the propositional contents of experiential beliefs are *not* constituted by such non-comparative concepts then how else are we to explain the non-vacuous nature of that biconditional? This he invokes to dispel the *ad hoc* aura of his appeal to non-comparative concepts as constitutive of the propositional contents of such experiential beliefs. And it should be noted as a consequence of this explanation of the non-vacuous nature of that biconditional that the appearance theorist thinks that we can know how things look without ever necessarily knowing how they *are*.

Does this defence of the infallibility of experiential belief add up? Not really: the problem is, the use of the appearance theorist's understanding of how the conceptual analogue of the non-comparative meaning of the locution 'looks red' in an explanation of how that biconditional can be considered non-vacuous aside, there seems to be evidence *against* its playing any role—again as the appearance theorist understands it—in regards to the cases that matter, i.e., when I express an experiential belief and that assertion turns out to be false in regards to the actual facts of the case at hand (in

standard conditions obviously). In regards to such cases the appearance theorist ‘seems to misuse the notion of an error which is *merely* verbal’.<sup>57</sup> Dancy writes:

There are several sorts of such errors.... But the case where, choosing my words carefully with full consciousness of what I am doing, I deliberately pronounce on the nature of my present sensory state is not one of them. Here if I am wrong, my error is substantial, for in being wrong about whether ‘pink’ is the word to describe my present experience I am wrong about what pink is and hence about whether my experience is of pink rather than of orange. Here then the error is both verbal and substantial.<sup>58</sup>

The import of this point is that a case like the one we have described, which is exactly where the two meanings of the locution ‘looks red’ should *coincide* if the non-comparative one supposedly at work in the propositional content of an experiential belief is to make any semantic contribution to the comparative one that *must be* at work in the expression of that belief, does not give credence to the presence of the former in that propositional content because I can still get it *wrong*—still make a false assertion—even after I choose ‘my words carefully with full consciousness of what I am doing’ in attempting to express that empirical belief. It would appear more likely that I do not understand what the locution ‘looks red’ means *at all* in such a situation.

Ultimately, if we are to really give credence to the idea that we can have an infallible experiential belief in terms of its having a propositional content constituted by non-comparative concepts necessarily specific or particular to the propositional content of that experiential belief in that qualitative character of that appearance we would do better to assimilate the non-comparative ‘looks red’ to *the purely demonstrative* ‘looks this’, a concept ‘devoid of all implications for [its] further application’.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, ‘What is... plausibly infallible is a belief that things *look that way now* to me’, but to imagine a foundation of experiential beliefs—basic beliefs—with *such* content is to imagine a foundation *devoid* of empirical content.<sup>60</sup> Even without considering the other two applications of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic the appearance theory cannot escape it. Nonetheless, this still leaves the matters of the explanation of the non-iterative nature of looks-talk, and how we can understand that biconditional to be non-vacuous, to be dealt with (for which see §4.1).

### §3.3. Bonjour’s Argument

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 59.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, pp. 59—60.

<sup>59</sup> M. Williams, *PK*, p. 101.

<sup>60</sup> Dancy, *ICE*, p. 59, original emphasis.

I suggested above that the appearance theory was the simplest way for the foundationalist to attempt to answer or elude the evidential regress argument, obviously implying that it is not the only way such an attempt can be made. However, given that our fallibility encompasses our cognitive capacities as well as our perceptual capacities, indeed, perhaps ‘that we are nowhere entirely immune from the possibility of error’, it is not surprising that many modern foundationalists do not feel the force, or bother to respond, to that argument.<sup>61</sup> As Dancy remarks:

One of the main reasons for wanting one’s own basic beliefs to be infallible is that it would guarantee that they are all true. But is there really any purpose in seeking this guarantee? The principles of inference by which we are to move from basic to non-basic beliefs are fallible, in the sense that they take us sometimes from true belief to false ones.... If there is this source of contamination necessarily present in the procedure, why should we insist that the input to the procedure be completely sterile, i.e. devoid of any taint of falsehood?<sup>62</sup>

On the other hand, I take it that the moral of the evidential regress argument is that we must be able to illustrate how our conceptual capacities hook onto the mind-independent in some way, so I think that simply ignoring that argument is un-principled. In fact, this passage from Dancy highlights another problem related to that same issue: how can we be sure that inference even works as a method of epistemically relating beliefs if there is no separable instance of an inference that works infallibly? Nonetheless, what I have called ‘Bonjour’s argument’—after Lawrence Bonjour, we might now add—would appear to undermine any foundationalism which seeks to posit its foundations at the level of *beliefs*. In other words, it undermines the whole notion of a basic belief.

I have suggested that Bonjour’s argument is to be understood as the application of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic to the third of the epistemic loci I identified in §1.1, i.e., (III): the epistemic distinctness of the secondary evidence concerning the epistemic property exhibited by the evidence in favour of that proposition from the evidence in favour of that proposition. However, he himself does not treat it in that way, instead blending the problem of the criterion into it. Why I will leave it as is, bar some qualifications, is that it enables the easy derivation of the central thesis of the sense-datum theory, as we shall see.

In the first instance, Bonjour formulates his argument thus:

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 58.

if basic beliefs are to provide a secure foundation for empirical knowledge, if inference from them is to be the sole basis upon which other empirical beliefs are justified, then that feature, whatever it may be, by virtue of which a particular belief qualifies as basic must also constitute a good reason for thinking that belief true....

This crucial point may be formulated a bit more precisely, as follows. If we let *f* represent the basic feature or characteristic, whatever it may be [e.g. infallibility], which distinguishes basic empirical beliefs from other empirical beliefs, then in an acceptable foundationalist account a particular empirical belief *B* would qualify as basic only if the premises of the following justificatory argument were adequately justified:

- (1) *B* has feature *f*.
  - (2) Beliefs which have feature *f* are highly likely to be true.
- Therefore, *B* is highly likely to be true.<sup>63</sup>

He then argues that at least one of those premises—‘(1)’ or ‘(2)’—must itself be empirical and concludes that an empirical belief *qua* basic belief is always dependent for its *acceptance* as basic on at least one other empirical belief; therefore, it cannot be basic.

We can see straight away what (1) and (2) correspond with: those two elements of a reason to believe some proposition above and beyond evidence in its favour, i.e., what I have called ‘secondary evidence’ and an ‘epistemic principle’ (§1.1). In regards to the appearance theory ‘*f*’—the ‘feature’ or epistemic property, we should say, of a belief which is indicative of an empirical belief *qua* basic belief—will be infallibility, and we can imagine that the matching epistemic principle will be something like ‘Beliefs which are infallible will be true’, allowing an epistemic subject to reason to the conclusion that his empirical beliefs which exhibit that feature are acceptable as basic. And whilst the appearance theory allows the easy illustration of these points we must keep in mind that the main thrust of Bonjour’s argument is that *any* empirical belief posited *as* basic must be understood as *being* basic in virtue of some epistemic property *f*, and so Bonjour’s argument applies to any foundationalism that takes the foundation of his structure of empirical knowledge as composed of empirical beliefs.

Now, Bonjour thinks that *either* of (1) or (2) *could be a priori*, but that at least one of them must be empirical. In regards to that first claim, i.e., that either of (1) or (2) could be *a priori*, the obvious suggestion is that it is (2)—the epistemic principle—that is *a priori*.<sup>64</sup> We have met this thought before in §2.4 where it was observed that taking an epistemic principle to be an instance of *a priori* knowledge in an effort to escape the

<sup>63</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, pp. 30—31.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. *ibid*, p. 31.



problem of the criterion simply postponed the inevitable fact that *at some point an assumption of knowledge—whether empirical or not—must be made*. That is the moral of the problem of the criterion, at least as the Agrippan sceptic understands it. I suggested that, since there was no way to elude that fact, we need not consider the turn to the *a priori* as in anyway helping the epistemologist's cause. In regards to Bonjour's thought that either of (1) or (2) could be *a priori*, but that at least one of them must be empirical, then, we might object that both (1) and (2) *must be empirical*. But what I have called 'Bonjour's argument' only depends upon the idea that at least one of them must be empirical, and so we need not make too much of the fact that an appeal to the *a priori* is essentially redundant.

Before turning to the way Bonjour characterises the argument in the second instance, it will be useful to make two further points. Firstly, its relationship to the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic must be characterised. Bonjour employs the argument to illustrate how an empirical belief *qua* basic belief will always be dependent for its acceptance as basic upon another empirical belief. I have suggested that we might in fact take that as its dependence on two other empirical beliefs, but no matter. Moreover, I have suggested that it is most obvious that (2), i.e., the epistemic principle, will be *a priori* if either of the two premises are. Thus, we shall simply assume that (1), i.e., the secondary evidence, is an empirical belief. And now the implication of regress, and so the Agrippan trilemma, in regards to the third of the epistemic loci I identified in §1.1 is clearly deducible from Bonjour's conclusion, i.e., that an empirical belief *qua* basic belief will always be dependent for its acceptance as basic upon another empirical belief. For the *extended question*, so to speak, is how we can know that that other empirical belief is itself justified? And whilst we may implausibly assume for whatever reason that *its* propositional content is absolutely certain such that it is itself infallible, we will then need a further empirical belief to the effect that it exhibits that epistemic property, etc. (I take it that there is no need to go into the characterisation of the three options (a)—(c) again.) This just underscores Bonjour's conclusion by bringing out the implied regress contained within it.

The second point that should be made is that the secondary evidence *qua* empirical belief is an empirical belief only in that extended sense I have identified. It is empirical in that its propositional content concerns a deliverance of 'inner' sense, i.e., *the introspective experience of having an empirical belief that is putatively basic*. It is from such an experience that the further belief in the fact that that original belief has the epistemic property posited as indicative of a basic belief is derived. Therefore, the moral

of *this* application of the Agrippan trilemma, I submit, is that we cannot separate the two supposed domains of empirical knowledge—the mind-independent and the mind-dependent—as with a knife. Empirical knowledge *comes as a package*: introspective and memory knowledge, say, is just as empirical as, e.g., knowledge of mind-independent objects, and must necessarily be included in an account of the possibility of empirical knowledge from the beginning.

Bonjour formulates his argument more perspicuously thus:

- (1) Suppose that there are *basic empirical beliefs*, that is, empirical beliefs (a) which are... justified, and (b) whose justification does not depend on that of any further empirical beliefs.
- (2) For a belief to be epistemically justified requires that there be a reason why it is likely to be true.
- (3) For a belief to be epistemically justified for a particular person requires that this person be himself in cognitive possession of such a reason.
- (4) The only way to be in cognitive possession of such a reason is to believe *with justification* the premises from which it follows that the belief is likely to be true.
- (5) The premises of such a justifying argument for an empirical belief cannot be entirely *a priori*; at least one such premise must be empirical.

Therefore, the justification of a supposed basic empirical belief must depend on the justification of at least one other empirical belief, contradicting (1); it follows that there can be no basic empirical beliefs.<sup>65</sup>

How could the foundationalist respond to this argument? The foundationalist can argue, as Bonjour writes:

That the believer's cognitive grasp of the premises required for [the justifying argument for B to be accepted as basic]... does not involve further empirical *beliefs*, which would themselves require justification. What is involved is rather... states of a more rudimentary type which do not themselves require justification, despite having the capacity to confer justification on beliefs. It is these more rudimentary states which are thus, according to this position, the ultimate source of epistemic justification; although such basic beliefs are indeed the most basic *beliefs*, they are not the most basic [epistemic]... states.<sup>66</sup>

That is, I do not require another belief to the effect that my belief that 'There looks to be a Martian in front of my eyes' has the epistemic property indicative of non-inferential justification. Instead, that belief is non-inferentially justified in virtue of its interaction—however this is to be characterised—with an epistemically prior item which is not a belief and which does not itself require a justification.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, p. 32, original emphasis. In regards to '(5)' see remarks above.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, p. 33, original emphasis.

This is the thought codified by the sense-datum theory which we now turn to: it is an appearance itself, as distinct from an experiential belief whose propositional contents directly concerns it, which in some manner plays the role of the foundation of empirical knowledge. We have seen that Lewis talks of ‘those presentations and passages of experience which provide’ the warrant for ‘objective truths’. The former he also calls ‘the given’—‘the immediately presented or directly presentable contents of experience’.<sup>67</sup> And it is ‘the given’ which he takes to be the ultimate foundation of empirical knowledge.

We must note the implications of the claim that the given do not require justification, although they are *epistemically efficacious*, so to speak. Not only will they stop the regress of conditional justification codified in the epistemic regress argument, but they will: (i), be absolutely certain in that they simply *are* what the *second*-level empirical beliefs of the sense-datum theorist’s structure of empirical knowledge will concern and not other beliefs about those things; (ii), *not* require that an epistemic subject know that they have the epistemic property indicative of their being basic or foundational; and (iii), be empirical knowledge arrived at *without* the requirement that an epistemic subject apply a criterion of empirical knowledge. That is, they will elude *all four* of the applications of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic. An appeal to the given seems to present an overwhelmingly attractive prospect for the foundationalist.

#### §3.4. The Sense-Datum Theory and Sellars’s Dilemma

What is going on in an appeal to the given? How does it enable the foundationalist to question the second assumption underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument? That assumption is that a reason to believe some proposition must always be something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. For the sense-datum theorist that assumption is *apparently* acceptable—*contra* the appearance theorist—however the Agrippan sceptic mistakenly thinks that beliefs are the only items which can play a justificational role in an epistemic economy. There are other items—instances of the given—which do not require a reason to believe them because they are simply not beliefs. And these can play the role of reasons to believe empirical beliefs at the second-, non-inferential level of the sense-datum theorist’s structure of empirical

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<sup>67</sup> Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, p. 176.

knowledge. Effectively, we *just have* empirical knowledge in that we *just have* instances of the given. But can the given really play such a *universal* epistemic role?

What is important for our purposes here is the manner in which the appeal to the given is made. That is, in consideration of Lewis's position Bonjour writes:

our immediate concern is to understand the precise epistemological role which the given content in question is supposed to play. In order to do this, we need again to consider in detail the elements and structure of an actual justificatory situation: First, there is the particular foundational or basic belief [*re* the second-level empirical belief] which is supposed to be non-inferentially justified. We will assume that such a basic belief is always the belief, linguistically formulable only in expressive language, that a certain specific given content is present, for example, that I seem to see something red. If this belief is true, as we may also assume, then it must be the case, second, that a red element is actually present in my experience. But it seems clear on reflection that these two elements are not enough. It is not enough for the appropriate experiential content merely to exist; rather it must be *grasped* or *apprehended* by me if I am to have a reason for accepting the basic belief. And thus we have a third element which seemingly must be present in the situation: the *immediate apprehension* or *direct experience* of the experiential content in question, the apprehension that a red element is present.<sup>68</sup>

Now, it is the '*immediate apprehension* or *direct experience*' we are interested in the character of—is it epistemic or not? And which ever way the sense-datum theorist decides to fall on this matter will be dictated by how he conceives of the character of the 'red element' actually present in an experience, i.e., the instance of the given.

After Sellars, we should recognise that the sense-datum theorist has two choices. He can either:

- (1) Treat the red element as a *particular*, i.e., a *non-epistemic item*, in which case the immediate apprehension or direct experience of it cannot itself amount to a knowing, i.e., be epistemic—the existence of a red element 'does not *logically* imply the existence of knowledge'.<sup>69</sup>
- (2) Treat the red element as a *fact*, i.e., an *epistemic item*, in which case the immediate apprehension or direct experience of it can amount to a knowing, i.e., be epistemic—the existence of a red element does logically imply the existence of knowledge.

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<sup>68</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 74, original emphasis and with suitable elisions and substitutions for ease of understanding.

<sup>69</sup> Sellars, *EPM*, §3, p. 16, original emphasis.

In the case of (1) we should *not* take it that *s*'s immediate apprehension or direct experience of the red element can justify his second-level empirical belief whose propositional content directly concerns it. That is, that empirical belief *qua* basic belief is simply *not* non-inferentially justified by that red element, i.e., is *not* basic. A particular is not propositionally structured, and so does not admit of truth or falsity—how, then, can it be a reason to believe the propositional content of that second-level empirical belief? In the case of (2) we may take it that *s*'s immediate apprehension or direct experience of the red element *can* justify his second-level empirical belief *qua* basic belief, but then it is 'difficult or impossible to see why it does not itself require justification in order to be thus acceptable'.<sup>70</sup> This is the dilemma the sense-datum theorist faces which I flagged in the introduction to this chapter.

Which is to say: whilst the sense-datum theorist may understand himself as having located a third assumption underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument, i.e., that only beliefs can play a justificational role in an epistemic economy, he has in fact done no such thing. If he conceives of the red element in non-epistemic terms then it can simply play no justifying role in regards to a second-level empirical belief. On the other hand, if he conceives of it in epistemic terms then it can play such a role, however he can provide no good reason for why we should not simply require that it be justified just as it justifies that second-level empirical belief. Indeed, why not simply treat it as another belief? Yet even if we do allow that items other than beliefs can play a justificational role in an epistemic economy the second assumption can be expanded to encompass this in any case. We just expand it to read: a justification for anything which can be thought of as playing a justificational role in an epistemic economy must always be something epistemically distinct from that which it concerns. I submit that the sense-datum theorist has discovered no third assumption underlying the epistemic regress argument.

However, there are two possible routes out of the dilemma which suggest themselves, one attempting to combine the horns corresponding to (1) and (2), the other to pass safely through the middle. The first is to deny the strict differentiation between the red element, understood as a particular, and *s*'s immediate apprehension or direct experience of it, understood as a fact. To introduce some further terminology: let us call the red element in my experience in *complex with s*'s immediate apprehension or direct experience of it a 'sense datum', but that red element *alone*, a 'sense content'. (Thus

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<sup>70</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 75.

why I have called this theory ‘the sense-datum theory’.) The sense-datum theorist can now say the following:

The non-inferential knowing on which our world picture rests is the knowing that certain items, e.g. red sense contents, are of a certain character, e.g. red. When such a fact is non-inferentially known about a sense-content, I will say that the sense content is sensed *as being*, e.g., *red*. I will then say that a sense content is *sensed* (full stop) if it is *sensed as being* of a certain character, e.g. red. Finally, I will say of a sense content that it is *known* if it is sensed (full stop), to emphasize that sensing is a *cognitive* or *epistemic* fact.<sup>71</sup>

This is to say that there is a *dual aspect* to *s*’s immediate apprehension or direct experience of that red element: *s* both senses (non-inferentially knows) a fact about it, e.g. that it is red, i.e., as a sense-*datum*, and also senses (knows) it *in its particularity*, so to speak, i.e., as a sense-*content*. The two come together. But note that for *s* to sense (know) it in its particularity—as a sense-content—entails that ‘it is logically necessary... it be *sensed as being of a certain character*, and that if it be *sensed as being of a certain character*, the *fact that it is of that character be non-inferentially known*’, i.e., that he also knows it as a sense-datum.<sup>72</sup> The claim then, is that whilst the red sense-content is a particular, it is, in a sense, a *self-presenting particular*, so to speak. Yet as Bonjour writes:

the same dilemma as was formulated above may be applied to this response: is that non-inferential knowledge allegedly built in to the red element cognitive or noncognitive, judgemental or nonjudgemental? If the former, then it seems impossible to deny that it is at least *logically* distinct from the given content of which it is non-inferential knowledge of. How after all can a red element fail to be logically distinct from the non-inferential knowledge that such a red element is present? The latter, unlike the former, is propositionally formed, capable of being true or false, and capable of serving as the premise of an inference; whereas the former, unlike the latter, is literally red (in the appropriate sense). How can two things as different as this fail to be distinct? If, on the other hand, the non-inferential knowledge is held to be nonjudgmental, noncognitive, there seems to be no *clear* reason for distinguishing it from the red element of which it is non-inferential knowledge of. But as already argued, a nonjudgemental, noncognitive understanding of non-inferential knowledge can provide no justification for a basic belief.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Sellars, *EPM*, §4, p. 17, original emphasis.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid, §4, p. 17, original emphasis.

<sup>73</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 76, original emphasis and with suitable elisions and substitutions for ease of understanding.

We should take it, then, that the first proposed way in which the sense-datum theorist may escape the dilemma, i.e., the attempted combination of the horns corresponding to (1) and (2), is an epistemological bust.

The second route out of the dilemma attempts to go between the horns corresponding to (1) and (2). Instead of *s*'s immediate apprehension or direct experience of that red element being either epistemic or non-epistemic it is neither one nor the other but an *admixture* of them both; *it is semi-epistemic*, so to speak. Let us call this 'the direct apprehension route'. *S* directly apprehends a *fact* (the epistemic part), but that apprehension is unmediated by *concepts* (the non-epistemic part). Yet again this route is open to objection. Sellars writes:

How is 'direct apprehension' to be understood? If the apprehending is distinguishable from the apprehended, is it not also 'separable'? Might not apprehending occur without any *fact* being apprehended? If so, an 'apprehending that-*p*' might not be an apprehending of the fact that-*p*. Hitting, in baseball, implies that something is hit. 'Swinging' does not. To *hit* is to *swing successfully*. Of course, 'apprehend', like 'see', is, *in its ordinary sense*, an achievement word. But does this not mean that, as in the case of 'see', there is a place for 'ostensibly apprehending', i.e., *seeming to apprehend*, a concept which does not imply achievement?<sup>74</sup>

He continues:

Many who use the metaphor 'to see' in intellectual contexts overlook the fact that in its literal sense 'seeing' is a term for a *successful* conceptual activity which contrasts with 'seeming to see'. No piling on of additional metaphors (e.g., 'grasping', which implies an object grasped) can blunt this fact. Now the distinction between *seeing* and merely *seeming to see* implies a criterion. To rely on the metaphors of 'apprehending' or 'presence of the object' is to obscure the need for criteria for distinguishing between 'knowing' and 'seeming to know', which ultimately define what it means to speak of knowledge as a *correct* or well-founded *thinking* that something is the case.

If so, to know that we apprehend a fact, we would have to know that the criteria which distinguish *apprehending* from *seeming to apprehend* were satisfied. In short, I suspect that the notion of a non-conceptual 'direct apprehension' of a 'fact' provides a merely verbal solution to our problem [*re* the regress of conditional justification]. The regress is stopped by an *ad hoc* regress-stopper.<sup>75</sup>

Or, as Bonjour remarks, 'to say simply that acts of immediate apprehension, unlike ordinary beliefs, somehow cannot by their very nature be mistaken is to stipulate that

<sup>74</sup> Sellars, 'The Structure of Knowledge', III, §23, p. 339, original emphasis, in Hector-Neri Castañeda (ed.), *Action, Knowledge, and Reality: Critical Studies in Honour of Wilfrid Sellars*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1975), pp. 295–347.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, III, §§24–25, p. 339, original emphasis.

this problem [*re* the non-inferential justification of empirical beliefs at the second-level of the sense-datum theorist's structure of empirical knowledge whose propositional contents concern that which is directly apprehended, i.e., the red element] does not exist without offering any clear explanation of how and why this is so'.<sup>76</sup>

Indeed, I think we should regard this second attempt to escape the dilemma formulated above as effectively unintelligible. It is akin to positing 'semi-events, which could cause but need to be caused; semiexplanantia, which could explain but need to be explained'.<sup>77</sup> However, I think we can learn a little more from the first of those attempts to escape that dilemma. For the sense-datum theorist takes *s*'s sensing (knowing) of the red element in its particularity, i.e., as a sense-content, 'to be a fact which presupposes no learning, no forming of associations, no setting up of stimulus-response connections', but *s*'s sensing (non-inferentially knowing) a fact about it, e.g., that it is red, i.e., as a sense-datum, *as involving all those things*.<sup>78</sup> As Sellars continues:

In short, [the sense-datum theorist has tended]... to equate *seeing sense contents* with *being conscious*, as a person who has been hit on the head is *not* conscious whereas a new born babe, alive and kicking, *is* conscious. [He]... would admit, of course, that the ability to know that a *person*, namely oneself, is *now*, at a certain time, feeling a pain, *is* acquired and does presuppose a (complicated) process of concept formation. But, [he]... would insist, to suppose that the simple ability to *feel a pain* or *see a color*, in short, to sense sense contents, is *acquired* and involves a process of concept formation, would be very odd indeed.

But if a sense-datum philosopher takes the ability to sense sense contents to be unacquired, he is clearly precluded from offering an analysis of *x senses a sense content* which presupposes acquired abilities. It follows that he could analyze *x senses red sense content s* as *x non-inferentially knows that s is red* only if he is prepared to admit that the ability to have such non-inferential knowledge as that, for example, a red sense content is red, is itself unacquired. And this brings us face to face with the fact that most empirically minded philosophers are strongly inclined to think that all classificatory consciousness, all knowledge *that something is thus-and-so*, or, in logicians' jargon, all subsumption of particulars under universals, involves learning, concept formation, even the use of symbols.<sup>79</sup>

The point being that the sense-datum theorist who pushes the first attempt to escape the dilemma is committed to a picture in which *s* is *required to have* concepts before we would wish to say that he has *acquired* concepts. And Sellars agrees that this is indicative of the fact that the sense-datum theorist has confused two ideas:

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<sup>76</sup> Lawrence Bonjour, 'Foundationalism and the External World', p. 231, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 13 (s13; 1999), pp. 229—248.

<sup>77</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 77.

<sup>78</sup> Sellars, *EPM*, §6, p. 20.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, §6, p. 20, original emphasis.



- (1) The idea that there are certain inner episodes—e.g. sensations of red or of C# which can occur to human beings (and brutes) without any prior process of learning or concept formation; and without which it would *in some sense* be impossible to *see*, for example, that the facing surface of a physical object is red and triangular, or *hear* that a certain physical sound of C#.
- (2) The idea that there are certain inner episodes which are non-inferential knowings that certain items are, for example, red or C#; and that these episodes are the necessary conditions of empirical knowledge as providing the evidence for all other empirical propositions.<sup>80</sup>

Where '(1)' 'clearly arises in the attempt to explain the facts of sense perception in scientific style', but unfortunately gets rolled up with '(2)' when the epistemologist realises that it seems 'to fit the requirements of another, and less fortunate, line of thought so well that it has almost invariably been distorted to give the latter [*re* (2)] a reinforcement without which it would long ago have collapsed'.<sup>81</sup> Let us finish this chapter, then, by looking at how Sellars describes this 'less fortunate' 'line of thought':

The seeing that the facing surface of a physical object is red and triangular is a *veridical* member of a class of experiences—let us call them 'ostensible seeings'—some of the members of which are non-veridical; and there is no inspectible hallmark which guarantees that *any* such experience is veridical. To suppose that the non-inferential knowledge on which our world picture rests consists of such ostensible seeings, hearings, etc., as *happen* to be veridical is to place empirical knowledge on too precarious a footing—indeed, to open the door to skepticism by making a mockery of the word *knowledge* in the phrase "empirical knowledge."

Now it is, of course, possible to delimit subclasses of ostensible seeings, hearings, etc., which are progressively less precarious, i.e., more reliable, by specifying the circumstances in which they occur, and the vigilance of the perceiver. But the possibility that any given ostensible seeing, hearing, etc., is non-veridical can never be entirely eliminated. Therefore, given that the foundation of empirical *knowledge* cannot consist of the veridical members of a class not all the members of which are veridical, and from which the non-veridical members cannot be weeded out by 'inspection,' this foundation cannot consist of such items as *seeing that the facing surface of a physical object is red and triangular*.<sup>82</sup>

Clearly this 'line of thought' corresponds with the effect upon foundationalism of the evidential regress argument, for that is what we have taken the foundationalist to be responding to when setting his foundations at the level of experiential belief or, indeed, sense-contents. So it is important to note Sellars own response to this line of thought:

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, §7, pp. 21—22, original emphasis.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, §7, pp. 22—23,

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, §7, pp. 23—24, original emphasis.

Thus baldly put, scarcely anyone would accept this conclusion. Rather they would take the contrapositive of the argument and reason that *since* the foundation of empirical knowledge *is* the non-inferential knowledge of such facts, it *does* consist of members of a class which contains non-veridical members.<sup>83</sup>

But then I have taken the moral of the evidential regress argument to be the requirement that our empirical concepts intelligibly hook onto the mind-independent, for which I take it that absolute certainty is required somewhere, so it would appear that here Sellars and I are fundamentally out of step. Nonetheless, I take it that, whilst Sellars never explicitly considers the evidential regress argument, and so is content to argue for a 'foundation of empirical knowledge' which '*does* consist of members of a class which contains non-veridical members', his arguments actually allow for at least a singular case in which we simply cannot be wrong concerning the mind-independent (see §6.6). And an important step in that argument is disabusing us of the thought that the *experience* of the mind-independent and the mind-dependent can be separated as with a knife.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, §7, p. 24, original emphasis.

## Chapter Four: From Logical Atomism to the Coherence Theory of Concepts

### Introduction

In the previous chapter (§§3.1—3.2) we noted two linguistic facts invoked by the appearance theorist in favour of his position. Whilst I argued that that position was to be rejected, this still left those facts to be explained away. In this chapter I endeavour to do that. That is, in explaining away those facts I argue that not only is the foundationalist's epistemological position problematic, but so—in certain respects—is his semantics.

In the first section I present Sellars's analysis of looks-talk. This is suggestive of the fact that we could not know how things *look* without also being able to know how they *are*. It explains away the non-iterative nature of looks-talk, not in terms of the certain truth of appearance statements attributed to them by the appearance theorist, but because in making such statements an epistemic subject is denying endorsement to, i.e., the truth of, the propositional content of, an experience. Moreover, the contingent *a priori* truth '*X is red iff x would look red to standard observers in standard conditions*' Sellars shows to be non-vacuous, not because the use of 'looks red' on the right-hand side is non-comparative, but because of the phrase 'standards observers in standard conditions'. Perhaps the most important consequence of Sellars's analysis of looks-talk, however, is the suggestion that we should cleave to a coherence theory of concepts, and so a holistic semantics. That is, we should not subscribe to the semantic or logical atomism of foundationalism.

In the second and final section (§4.2) I quickly cover how Sellars thinks that we might go about explaining his analysis of looks-talk, i.e., the possibility of non-veridical perceptual experiences. And whilst we are really only interested in the first, perfectly useful kind of explanation he proffers, it will be helpful to at least allude to how he thinks a more thoroughgoing explanation might be given. This will finally allow us to dispose with the sense-datum theorist, as well as being of import when we turn to Sellars's epistemology (§§6.1—6.6), and specifically in relation to how he wants us to conceive of our acquisition of mentalistic discourse, i.e., our acquisition of concepts pertaining to thought.

### §4.1. Sellars's Analysis of 'Looks-Talk'

The appearance theorist, as we have understood him, takes experiential beliefs to have propositional contents that directly concern appearances, in that they are restricted to characterising the subjective character of a sense-experience and make no claim concerning how it is with the mind-independent. Such experiential beliefs are to be *expressed* by statements which involve the comparative use of 'looks red', although their propositional contents themselves involve the non-comparative conceptual analogue of the use of 'looks red' at work in the statement 'Red things normally look red'. Although I made no allusion to it (§3.4) the sense-datum theorist makes a similar move: the second-level empirical beliefs of his structure of empirical knowledge have propositional contents again characterised in terms of the 'looks red' locution and, we might now infer, in terms of the conceptual analogue of its non-comparative use. (Recall Bonjour: 'We will assume that such a basic belief is always the belief, linguistically formulable only in expressive language, that a certain specific given content is present, for example, that I *seem* to see something red'—my italics.) And certainly it is the case that if any use of that locution is at work in the propositional contents of experiential beliefs it will be the conceptual analogue of its non-comparative use; the appearance theorist is correct about that. For surely an epistemic subject really *is* trying to express the qualitative character of *that* appearance—*how things looks to him*—when expressing such a belief. Nonetheless, the appearance theorist confuses this thought in attempting to defend the infallibility of his experiential, basic beliefs.

Indeed, whilst we have seen that both the appearance and sense-datum theories are to be objected to for epistemological reasons, we have not as yet turned to consider their semantic claims.<sup>84</sup> The very notion of a basic belief, or an epistemic item which doesn't itself require justification although it nonetheless can justify, i.e., *s's* immediate experience or direct apprehension of a red element in his experience understood along any of the lines in which that immediate experience or direct apprehension is to be considered epistemic and so conceptual, are explicit expressions of the foundationalist's *epistemic atomism*. And in companion to his epistemic atomism the foundationalist must also espouse a *semantic* or *logical atomism*: 'If a belief can be justifiably held in the absence of any further beliefs, *a fortiori* it can be held (justifiably or not) in such conditions'.<sup>85</sup> That is, the propositional content of a belief or other epistemic state can

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<sup>84</sup> I take it that the argument to the effect that an infallible empirical basic belief would have literally no content, and so not be *empirical* at all (§3.2), is an epistemological result.

<sup>85</sup> Williams, *PK*, p. 94. As stated in §2.2 I will make no claims as to which comes first—the epistemological position or the theory of concept-acquisition/semantics.

be understood without an epistemic subject being able to understand the propositional content of any other belief or epistemic item. As Williams writes:

Behind this account of basic knowledge lies a certain picture of meaning and understanding. In this picture, two sorts of rules or 'definitions' determine the conceptual abilities that go with understanding a language. Some words get their meanings by *discursive* definitions: definitions that link words with other words. Such definitions state analytic truths, such as 'A bachelor is an unmarried male'. But not all words can get their meanings this way. Some meanings must be established by *ostensive* definitions, which set up rules or conventions linking words with extra-linguistic reality. Ostensive definitions apply first and foremost to objects and qualities that we can grasp directly in experience: we learn what things are properly called 'red' by being presented with examples.<sup>86</sup>

This 'picture of meaning and understanding' has been trenchantly criticised in recent times, however we have noted that the appearance theorist's appeal to the conceptual analogue of the non-comparative use of 'looks red' is not without apparent linguistic evidence in its favour, i.e., the non-iterative nature of looks-talk, as well as the question of how we are to make the contingent *a priori* truth expressed in the biconditional '*X is red iff x would look red to standard observers in standard conditions*' *non-vacuous*. Can we explain away such linguistic evidence?

This would be to argue against foundationalism from the semantic aspect of the dialectic. The question we should ask, then, given that both the appearance theorist and sense-datum theorist take it that they can have experiential beliefs or second-level empirical beliefs whose propositional contents are properly expressed by statements involving 'looks red' is how an epistemic subject can come by that locution without being able to tell whether a mind-independent object actually is, e.g., red? And it must be noted that things are a little more complicated in the case of the sense-datum theorist, for the fundamental conceptual resource of his theory is not in fact looks-talk, but instead 'senses-talk', the third-personal expression of *s*'s second-level empirical belief 'There looks to be something red over there to *s*' to be parsed as '*S* senses red sense-content *x*'. Indeed, the sense-datum theorist appears free to excise the semantic middlemen of appearance statements and directly parse existence statements in terms of senses-talk. But if we begin by questioning the appearance theorist's more straight forward claim to looks-talk we shall in any case find reason to question the sense-datum theorist's claim.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 101, original emphasis.

We have seen (§3.4) that Sellars takes the sense-datum theorist to have confused two distinct theses: '(1) The idea that there are certain "inner episodes", e.g. the sensation of a red triangle or of a C# sound, which occur to human beings and brutes without any prior process of learning or concept formation, and without which it would—in *some* sense—be impossible to *see*, for example, that the facing surface of a physical object is red and triangular, or *hear*, that a certain physical sound is C#; (2) The idea that there are certain "inner episodes" which are the noninferential knowings that, for example, a certain item is red and triangular, or, in the case of sounds, C#, which inner episodes are the necessary conditions of empirical knowledge as providing the evidence for all other empirical propositions'.<sup>87</sup> He continues:

If this diagnosis is correct, a reasonable next step would be to examine these two ideas and determine how that which survives criticism in each is properly to be combined with the other. Clearly we would have to come to grips with the idea of *inner episodes*, for this is common to both.<sup>88</sup>

Now, the route via which Sellars himself 'comes to grips with the idea of *inner episodes*'—*both* thoughts *and* appearances—I am taking as offering a possible way to undermine the Agrippan problematic. As a corollary of characterising how Sellars analyses looks-talk and so arguing against the logical atomism of the foundationalist, then, we will begin to come to grips with *the epistemological direction*, so to speak, in which Sellars will later take us.

Sellars begins his examination of looks-talk by making 'the simple but fundamental point that the sense of "red" in which things *look* red is, on the face of it, the same as that in which things *are* red'.<sup>89</sup> He continues: 'When one glimpses an object and decides that it looks red (to *me*, *now*, from here) and wonders whether it really *is* red, one is surely wondering whether the colour—red—which it looks to have is the one it really does have'.<sup>90</sup> That is, Sellars's thought is that '*being red* is logically prior, is a logically simpler notion, than *looking red*', where '*being red*' is a property of *physical objects*.<sup>91</sup> His argument has two parts. The *second* is to argue that 'x is red iff x would look red to standard observers in standard conditions' 'without this being a definition of "x is red" in terms of "x looks red"'.<sup>92</sup> That is, the second part is to explain away the

<sup>87</sup> Sellars, *EPM*, §10, pp. 32—33, original emphasis.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, §10, p. 33, original emphasis.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, §12, p. 35, original emphasis. I have taken the liberty of altering Sellars's use of 'green' to 'red' where appropriate throughout the following references of this chapter.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, §12, p. 35, original emphasis.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, §12, p. 36, original emphasis.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, §13, p. 36.

contingent *a prioricity* of that biconditional, i.e., illustrate why it is non-vacuous, without defining 'x is red' in terms of 'x looks red'. The *first* part, what Sellars calls the 'logically prior' step, concerns locating *the proper epistemic level*, so to speak, of looks-talk.<sup>93</sup>

Sellars points out that appearance statements like 'This is red' have *two* uses: (i), *they can be used to state facts*, i.e., act as the conclusions of inferences; and (ii), *they can be used to make reports*, i.e., for our purposes as non-inferential statements directly concerning mind-independent objects. This latter use is not as yet to be understood in the foundationalist sense of non-inferential knowledge, simply as an observation concerning such statements: they often appear to be causally elicited, without any process of inference being therefore involved in that elicitation. Nonetheless, clearly it is this second use which is of interest to any epistemologist concerned with non-inferential knowledge. Only such a statement in its reporting use could be an expression of a basic belief. Moreover, statements such as 'This looks red to me now' do seem to have such a reporting role—'Indeed, it would seem essentially a report'.<sup>94</sup>

However, simply in regards to their *logical compositionality* it can be seen that the statements 'This is red' and 'This looks red to me now' differ: the latter is logically more complex than the former. For the statement 'This is red' makes, or need make, no mention of the subject of experience or epistemic subject. 'This is red' will *not be true* in virtue of the fact that something is red to someone now, only because that *thing is red*. On the other hand, 'This looks red', even in such a truncated form, will *only be true* in virtue of the fact that something looks red to someone now—for something to look red *is for it to look red to someone*. That is, properly expressed appearance statements should always make reference to a subject of experience or epistemic subject: 'This looks red' is really to be expanded into something like 'This looks red to me now'.

Noting this point Sellars calls attention to the fact 'that the experience of having something look red to one at a certain time is, insofar as it is an experience, obviously very much like that of seeing something to be red, insofar as the latter is an experience'.<sup>95</sup> He continues:

But the latter, of course, is not *just* an experience. And this is the heart of the matter. For to say that a certain experience is a *seeing that* something is the case, is to do more than describe the experience. It is to characterize it as, so

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, §13, p. 36.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, §15, p. 39.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, §16, p. 39.

to speak, making an assertion or claim, and—which is the point I wish to stress—to *endorse* that claim.<sup>96</sup>

So note that simply in terms of the logical grammar of sees-talk Sellars is here ascribing propositional contents to appearances, although he is careful to express that such cannot be all that there is to an appearance: 'It is clear that the experience of seeing that something is red is not *merely* the occurrence of the propositional claim 'this is red'—not even if we add, as we must, that this claim is, so to speak, evoked or wrung from the perceiver by the object perceived'.<sup>97</sup> We might be surprised to find Sellars ascribing propositional contents to appearances: have we not just taken the sense-datum theorist to task for in effect the same idea? But to be clear: Sellars is *not* employing the thought that appearances are in part conceptual to argue for their foundational role in regards to the structure of empirical knowledge. Leaving this idea to the side for the moment, then, what does Sellars have to say concerning what we might call the 'something more' to an appearance over and above its propositional content? He remarks that this 'is clearly what philosophers have in mind when they speak of "visual impressions" or "immediate visual experiences."'<sup>98</sup> That is, what we have called the 'something more' to an appearance corresponds with *its qualitative character*.

The introduction of the thought that experiences have propositional contents allows Sellars to more fully differentiate the statement 'This is red'—in general, statements which *solely* involve is-talk—from statements that involve looks- and sees-talk. A statement such as *s*'s 'I see that *x* is red' is to be understood as his not only ascribing the propositional content to his experience that '*X* is red', but as *s* further *endorsing* that content. As Sellars comments: 'To characterize *S*'s experience as a *seeing* is, in a suitably broad sense... to apply the semantical concept of *truth* to that experience'.<sup>99</sup> On the other hand, in the case of *s*'s statement '*X* looks red to me at *t*' *s* attributes to himself an experience with the propositional content '*X* is red', but *does not* endorse that content. He does not take himself to have had a veridical experience. Sellars writes:

Thus, when I say "X looks red to me now" I am *reporting* the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically, *as an experience*, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that *x* is red. Involved in the report is the ascription to my experience of the claim '*x* is red'; and the fact that I make this report rather than the simple report "X is red" indicates that certain

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, §16, p. 39, original emphasis.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, §16*bis*, p. 40, original emphasis.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, §16*bis*, p. 40.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, §16*bis*, p. 40, original emphasis.



considerations have operated to raise, so to speak in a higher court, the question 'to endorse or not to endorse.' I may have reason to think that *x* may not after all be red.<sup>100</sup>

So notice that the matter of endorsement only comes up when that question—'to endorse or not to endorse'—comes up: thus the report 'I see that *x* is red' only occurs if I am prompted to make it for some reason, otherwise I will report on my experience with '*X* is red'.

At this point in Sellars's analysis of looks-talk he has achieved two things, although we have not explicitly highlighted them as yet. Firstly, he has defended the thought that the statement '*X* looks red to *s* at *t*' has a reporting use, and so is not to be understood as the conclusion of an inference, as the foundationalist would demand. An appearance statement reports on 'the fact that my experience is, so to speak, intrinsically, *as an experience*, indistinguishable from a veridical one of seeing that *x* is red'. But it is a *second-level report*, so to speak, one only engendered if the question of endorsement has come up. That is, in defending the idea that the statement '*X* looks red to *s* at *t*' has a reporting use, such that it is not to be understood as the conclusion of an inference, Sellars has supported the idea that it is the non-comparative use of the locution 'looks red' at work in appearance statements, although he has done so by arguing that it instead concerns the propositional element of an appearance. For if it was the comparative use it *would be* the conclusion of an inference. Unlike the appearance theorist his analysis of looks-talk does not confuse this thought. Moreover, he has explained away the non-iterative nature of looks-talk: someone can do *no more* than deny endorsement to the propositional content of some experience (someone cannot deny it *twice*). Thus he has concluded the first step of his argument, i.e., locating the proper epistemic level of looks-talk.

But what about the contingent *a priori* truth of the biconditional, i.e., the second step of his argument? Firstly, Sellars points out that if is-talk is logically prior to looks-talk as his analysis would suggest then we are confronted by the fact 'that the concept of *looking red*, the ability to recognize that something *looks red*, presupposes the concept of *being red*, and that that latter concept involves the ability to tell what colours objects have by looking at them—which, in turn, involves knowing in what circumstances to place an object if one wishes to ascertain its color by looking at it'.<sup>101</sup> It follows that if having the concept 'being red'—being able to use the locution 'is red'—involves 'knowing in what circumstances to place an object if one wishes to ascertain its color by

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, §16*bis*, p. 41, original emphasis.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, §18, p. 43, original emphasis.

looking at it' then the biconditional '*X* is red iff *x* would look red to standard observers in standard conditions' is non-vacuous because the right-hand side tells us in what conditions *x* will look the colour that it is—"standard conditions" means conditions in which things look what they are'.<sup>102</sup> Which is to instead explain its right-hand side clause 'looks red', which *is* to be understood as invoking the non-comparative use of that locution, in terms of 'to standard observers in standard conditions', i.e., to proffer *the reverse explanation* of its being non-vacuous to that of the appearance theorist (§3.2).

So note that we are now fundamentally 'out of step' with semantic or logical atomism.<sup>103</sup> Sellars writes:

as long as *looking red* is taken to be the notion to which *being red* is reducible, it could be claimed with considerable plausibility that fundamental concepts pertaining to observable fact have that logical independence of one another which is characteristic of the empiricist tradition. Indeed, at first sight the situation is quite disquieting, for if the ability to recognize that *x* looks red presupposes the concept of *being red*, and if this in turn involves knowing in what circumstances to view an object to ascertain its color, then, since one can scarcely determine what the circumstances are without noticing that certain objects have certain perceptible characteristics—including colors—it would seem that one couldn't form the concept of *being red*, and, by parity of reasoning, of the other colors, unless he already had them all.<sup>104</sup>

That is, if someone must know what standard conditions are to be able to recognise that *x* is red, then it must be the case that he can recognise certain observable characteristics of things like *x*, how they differ over a variety of conditions, how they differ when *he* is in a variety of conditions, etc. To think that this could occur *without* his being able to recognise other colours than red—which surely come under 'observable characteristics of things like *x*'—seems odd.

Sellars's contention here, that colour concepts come as a package, essentially, is explicitly suggestive of a coherence theory of concepts. Moreover, Sellars adopts a rather aggressive coherence theory of concepts. He writes:

Now, it just won't do to reply that to have the concept of red, to know what it is for something to be red, it is sufficient to respond when one is *in point of fact* in standard conditions, to green objects with the vocable "This is red." Not only must the conditions be of a sort that it appropriate for determining the color of an object by looking, the subject must *know* that

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, §18, p. 43.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, §18, p. 44.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, §19, p. 44, original emphasis.

conditions of this sort *are* appropriate. And while this does not imply that one must have concepts before one has them, it does imply that one can have the concept of red only by having a whole battery of concepts of which it is one element. It implies that while the process of acquiring the concept of red may—indeed, does—involve a long history of acquiring *piecemeal* habits of response to various objects in various circumstances, there is an important sense in which one has *no* concept pertaining to the observable properties of physical objects in space and time unless one has them all....<sup>105</sup>

Sellars therefore requires that someone who has the concept ‘being red’ is one who can use it *knowingly*. We shall return to this requirement below, however in the next section it will be useful to follow up on a response which the sense-datum theorist *qua* semantic or logical atomist may make to Sellars’s analysis of looks-talk, and what that entails, i.e., a coherence theory of concepts.

#### §4.2. Three Explanations

I have suggested that the sense-datum theorist—if he is careful, perhaps—need not invoke looks-talk, instead analysing ‘*X* is red at *t*’ as ‘*S* senses red sense-content *x* at *t*’. As Sellars puts it: ‘what is to prevent the sense-datum theorist from taking the line that the properties of physical objects are *directly* analyzable into the qualities and phenomenal relations of sense contents?’<sup>106</sup> That is, the sense-datum theorist points out that Sellars analysis of looks-talk, whilst indicative of the fact that empirical concepts *at a secondary level*, so to speak, are to be understood holistically, this in no way disbars him from analysing is-talk in terms of senses-talk. Now, let us ignore the implicit suggestion of phenomenalism in this thought. Really, the sense-datum theorist is here changing his tack: he is arguing for the ontological conclusion that there *must* be such things as sense-contents as the best *explanation* for the problems of perception, i.e., illusions, hallucinations, and the like, and this explanation can be further motivated *if* is-talk can be analysed in terms of sense-talk. Indeed, Sellars will not dispute the fact that there is something to this line of thought, but only if it is differentiated entirely from the epistemological aspects of those theories.

What we want is an explanation of Sellars’s analysis of looks-talk in regards to the qualitative aspect of an appearance: what is one having an experience *of* when one has an experience properly reported on by the statement ‘*X* looks red to me at *t*’? Must there not be *something* that is red even if *s* is not willing to endorse the propositional

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, §19, pp. 44-45, original emphasis.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, §20, p. 46, original emphasis.

content of his experience, i.e., *that x qua physical object is red*? The difficulty is that the redness that *something looks to have* is surely the redness that *physical objects do have*; to say *s* is experiencing something that looks red is surely, then, to say that he is experiencing a physical object that looks red, even if it is not red or there is no physical object there at all.

Sellars suggests that there is a simple, everyday explanation for looks-talk which makes no reference to some nefarious ontological intermediary between mind and mind-independent. 'Thus', he writes, 'it is perfectly proper to answer the question "Why does this object look red?" by saying "Because it is an orange object looked at in such and such circumstances."' <sup>107</sup> (And we could imagine, in the case of hallucination, the question 'Why am I seeing a Pink elephant?' answered by 'You're not *seeing* a pink elephant, it only looks like you are because you're on drugs'.) Notice that such explanations make no mention of ontological intermediaries between mind and mind-independent. 'But', as Sellars remarks, 'because these explanations are good, it by no means follows that explanations of other kinds might not be equally good, and, perhaps, more searching'. <sup>108</sup>

He suggests that there are 'two ways in which additional, but equally legitimate explanations *might* be forthcoming for such a fact as *x looks red*'. <sup>109</sup> The first of these is the one Sellars pursues:

Might it not be the case that just as there are two kinds of good explanation of the fact that this balloon has expanded, (a) in terms of the Boyle-Charles laws which relate the empirical concepts of volume, pressure, and temperature pertaining to gasses, and (b) in terms of the kinetic theory of gasses; so there are two ways of explaining the fact that this object looks red to S: (a) in terms of empirical generalizations relating the colors of objects, the circumstances in which they are seen, and the colors they look to have, and (b) in terms of a theory of perception in which 'immediate experiences' play a role analogous to that of the molecules of the kinetic theory.

So note that either of Sellars's '(a)'s are to be equated with the *less* searching explanation mentioned already, whereas his '(b)'s *go ontological*, so to speak, and attempt to explain away the facts of the case by reference to some unobservable, introduced or postulated, theoretical entity.

The key idea here is the thought that 'immediate experiences', or what I have called 'appearances', are *unobservable*. Certainly for the sense-datum theorist this

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, §21, p. 48.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, §21, p. 48.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, §22, p. 48, original emphasis.

cannot be the case—immediate experiences must be observable or they could not play the epistemological role required of them. We are supposed to base our empirical knowledge *on* our awareness of sense-contents, therefore it cannot be that they are theoretical entities, introduced *after* we have empirical knowledge to explain *prior* instances of it. Notice that we might think we are here following a redundancy: surely Sellars must defend his claim that the *first* explanation he posited can be a *good* explanation—how it enables us to explain the *reporting* role of is-, looks-, and sees-talk—and so enables us to explain instances of empirical knowledge, *before* turning to the claim that appearances can be made sense of as introduced or postulated theoretical entities? And that is indeed the case, but for my investigation the import of introducing this second kind of explanation of looks-talk which he envisages here will come out in the fact that for Sellars that prior step, i.e., even being able to offer that first explanation, involves a similar dialectical manoeuvre in the case of *thoughts*. That is, we must grasp the fundamental idea here: Sellars takes it that appearances are to be introduced as theoretical entities, i.e., that the concept of that which corresponds to the qualitative aspect of an appearance is *an addition to* our original, holistic conceptual resources, much like that of a ‘positron’ or ‘quark’. This is essentially the same manoeuvre he will make with concepts pertaining to thought (see §6.1). Moreover, we can now finally reject the sense-datum theorist.

For the second way in which Sellars thinks a more searching explanation of looks-talk can be given is the sense-datum theorist’s manner of doing it. Say that the sense-datum theorist accepts Sellars coherence theory of concepts at that secondary level, but nonetheless takes it that is-talk, and *consequently* looks- and sees-talk can all be parsed in terms of statements along the lines of ‘*S* senses red sense-content *x* at *t*’. That is, *the primary level* is still to be conceived of as semantically or logically atomistic. If this is to be the case the question the sense-datum theorist must answer is how an epistemic subject can come by the sense-datum framework? Where does he get it from? And Sellars’s analysis of looks-talk doesn’t uncover it.

The sense-datum theorist understands a sense-content as something *found* via the careful investigation of an experience, and the most obvious way in which this is to be done is by noting disparities between veridical and ostensibly veridical experiences—disparities between experiences properly described in terms of sees-talk and experiences properly described in terms of looks-talk, respectively. But it is a simple point, and one technically broached above in regards to the less searching explanation, that *neither* sees- *nor* looks-statements make reference to something like

sense-contents; they directly concern the propositional content of an experience, and in the latter case imply that if that propositional content were true then that experience would be a case of an epistemic subject seeing something—a physical object being red, say—to be the case. The point being that neither sees- nor looks-talk directly pertain to what we have called the qualitative aspect of an appearance, i.e., the putative sense-contents constitutive of an appearance; there is simply no evidence to be found in our everyday conceptual resources to defend the sense-datum theorist's claim that it is by the careful inspection of our experiences that we come by the sense-datum framework. This just reinforces the thought that it is from *within* those conceptual resources that an explanation of the possibility of empirical knowledge must be sought. However, as implied above, that does not suggest that we come by such conceptual resources *all at once*.

## **Chapter Five: Coherentism and the Agrippan Problematic**

### **Introduction**

Having suggested that we should opt for a holistic semantics, in this chapter I turn to the simplest epistemic position incorporating such a theory, i.e., the one I have called ‘coherentism’. Recall that the coherentist challenges *neither* of the assumptions underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument, simply modifying that premise itself. He suggests that in actual fact inferential justification is non-linear or holistic in character, such that the regress of conditional justification which loops around upon itself, i.e., (b), should not be discounted in regards to the charge of circular reasoning—the fact that a belief appears to paradoxically justify itself.

After further defining his position, in the first section I argue that the coherentist’s appeal to non-linear or holistic justification importantly disregards two of the necessary elements of a reason to believe some proposition, and that this would seem to entail that his position is not even formally sufficient to escape the epistemic regress argument.

In the next and final section (§5.2) I argue to that conclusion via the other applications of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic. Whilst I suggest that we can suitably idealise the coherentist’s position to escape the evidential regress argument, it is essentially a formal analogue of the appearance theory, except at a holistic level. Therefore, like the appearance theory it falls prey to Bonjour’s argument, and so is to be rejected. That is, I argue that coherentism is essentially a foundationalism, except at a holistic level. I end by commenting on the fact that the coherentist simply assumes a coherence theory of concepts, telling no story concerning how we come by our concepts.

### **§5.1. Coherentism and the Epistemic Regress Argument**

In a sense I have shown my hand already in regards to coherentism: in §2.3 I suggested that in regards to an attempt to carry through the traditional epistemological project no epistemically salient account of the notion of coherence can be given without the importation of a foundationalist element and thus the breakdown of any claim to holistic inferential justification. Moreover, as I have endeavoured to illustrate over the two

preceding chapters, foundationalism itself is to be rejected. Obviously, then, that previous claim needs to be defended.

I have mentioned on various occasions (§2.2, §2.3) that coherentism challenges *neither* the first *nor* second assumptions underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument. That premise is that all justification must be inferential, and the assumptions which underlie it are: firstly, that the only way in which a belief can justify another belief is inferentially; and secondly, a reason to believe some proposition must always be something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. Foundationalism challenges that second assumption, however it has been suggested that it is an untenable position. We might assume, then, that a reason to believe some proposition *is* always something epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns. (As we might, perhaps, wish—§2.2.) Coherentism, on the other hand, *modifies that premise*.

The coherentist accepts the second assumption and effectively accepts the first assumption, however he argues that the Agrippan sceptic, who doesn't really have any control of these assumptions in any case (as we saw in §2.2), falsely assumes that *all inferential justification must be linear*—indeed, *that it is linear at all*. As Bonjour writes:

The contrary suggestion is that [inferential] justification, when properly understood, is ultimately *nonlinear* or *holistic* in character, with all the beliefs in the system standing in relations of mutual support, but none being epistemically prior to others. In this way, it is alleged, any true circularity is avoided. Such a view amounts to making the system itself the primary unit of justification, with its component beliefs being justified only derivatively, by virtue of their membership in an appropriate sort of system.<sup>110</sup>

The coherentist's central claim can therefore roughly be summed up as follows: given a suitable account of what the notion of coherence amounts to, then 'if *a*'s belief-set is more coherent with the belief that *p* as a member than without it or with any alternative, *a* is (or would be) justified in believing that *p*'.<sup>111</sup> Thus, the coherence of a belief system devolves justification upon its constituent beliefs.

But what is meant by the claim that inferential justification is '*nonlinear* or *holistic* in character'? And how does it avoid 'any true circularity'? This thought clearly needs some explanation. Towards that end the coherentist begins by making a distinction between 'local' and 'global' contexts of justification. Bonjour again:

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<sup>110</sup> Bonjour, 'The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism', p. 123, original emphasis.

<sup>111</sup> Dancy, *ICE*, p. 116.



The epistemic justification on a particular occasion will usually be merely the justification of a single empirical belief, or small set of such beliefs, within the context of a cognitive system whose overall justification is (more or less) taken for granted; we may call this the *local* level of justification. But it is also possible, at least in principle, to raise the issue of the overall justification of the entire system of empirical beliefs; we may call this the *global level* of justification.<sup>112</sup>

So whilst it is possible ‘to raise the issue of the overall justification of the entire system of empirical beliefs’ the coherentist notes that, outside of the Agrippan problematic, or epistemology more generally perhaps, this rarely—if ever—occurs. In a local context of justification inferential justification *appears* linear. This is because, the coherentist argues, ‘premise-beliefs which are dialectically acceptable in that particular [local] context [of justification] and which can function rather like the foundationalist’s basic beliefs’ are *normally* reached.<sup>113</sup> Such ‘dialectically acceptable premise-beliefs’ are not *epistemically acceptable*, so to speak, premise-beliefs, but they *give us the impression* that inferential justification is linear, in that they masquerade as *actual* terminating points to chains of inferential justification. With this point in mind the coherentist charges the Agrippan sceptic with the apparently radical mistake of falsely importing the character of inferential justification in a local context of justification into the discussion of the character of inferential justification in the global context of justification.

But perhaps the coherentist is not really arguing with the Agrippan sceptic in making this claim as instead with the foundationalist over the phenomenology of what he takes to be local justification. For we might say that it is in fact the foundationalist who has really made the radical mistake of falsely importing the character of inferential justification in a local context of justification into the discussion of the character of inferential justification in the global context of justification, given that he accepts the first assumption, i.e., that the only way in which a belief can justify another belief is inferentially. The coherentist argues that ‘the epistemic dialogue [in a local context of justification] would if ideally continued eventually circle back upon itself, giving the appearance of a linear regress and in effect challenging the entire system of empirical beliefs’.<sup>114</sup> That is, it would not terminate with basic beliefs even if ‘ideally’ continued. (Note, then, the simple discounting of the infinite regress of conditional inferential justification.) Therefore it is the foundationalist who appears to confuse ‘the appearance

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<sup>112</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 91, original emphasis.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

of a linear regress' of inferential justification for an *actual* regress of inferential justification, a confusion which the coherentist takes as exhibiting a failure to understand the inferential interrelation between beliefs in the global, and not in a local, context of justification.

Now, we need not concern ourselves with *why* this is, although we might assume it is because of the foundationalist's logical atomism which would be further indicative of the fact that it is the coherentist's alliance with a coherence theory of concepts that enables his appeal to the non-linear or holistic character of inferential justification in the global context of justification. But in any case, as Bonjour writes:

According to the envisaged coherence theory, the relation between the various particular beliefs [constitutive of the belief system as a whole] is correctly to be conceived, not as one of linear dependence, but rather as one of mutual or reciprocal support. There is no ultimate relation of epistemic priority among the members of such a system and consequently no basis for a true regress. Rather the component beliefs of such a coherent system will ideally be so related that each can be justified in terms of the others, with the direction of argument on a particular occasion of local justification depending on which belief (or set of beliefs) has actually been challenged in that particular situation. And hence, a coherence theory will claim, the apparent circle of justification is not in fact vicious *because it is not genuinely a circle*: the justification of a particular belief finally depends, not on other particular beliefs as the linear conception of justification would have it, but instead on the overall system and its coherence.<sup>115</sup>

So the distinction between a local and the global contexts of justification—that distinction which the coherentist takes *someone somewhere* to have fallaciously ignored—comes out in the suggestion that the 'direction of argument on a particular occasion of local justification' *depends upon* 'which belief (or set of beliefs) has actually been challenged in that particular situation'. The direction of argument, i.e., that which gives the appearance of linearity in a local context of justification, could just as easily have *gone the other way* in regards to the global context of justification if another belief (or set of beliefs) in that apparent regress of inferential justification which—in *fact*—loops around upon itself had had *their* justification questioned. That being the case, any true circularity thought to accrue to the global context of justification is supposedly avoided.

To say that the direction of argument 'could just as easily have *gone the other way*', as I did in the last paragraph, is to suggest that the coherentist is taking *the first element* of a reason to believe some proposition as differentiated in §1.1, i.e., the

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, pp. 91—92, original emphasis.

evidence in favour of some proposition, as admitting of more than the one-way deductive inference intimated there. For it is surely the deductive inference I employ from my understanding of the theses to the conclusion that, *if* they are true, or likely to be true, *then* the proposition that 'Martians exist' is true, or likely to be true, which appears to entail the direction of argument. The coherentist's thought seems to be that I could reason *back*, in a sense, from my belief that 'Martians exist' to the conclusion that those theses are true, or likely to be true, *if* the proposition that 'Martians exist' is itself true, or likely to be true. This is obviously intuitively suggestive of the fact that my belief in the proposition that 'Martians exist' can play the role of an item of evidence in favour of the propositions encapsulated in those theses, as long as, of course, I have secondary evidence and an epistemic principle to fill out the rest of a reason to believe those theses. Yet bringing up those other elements I have suggested to be constitutive of a reason to believe some proposition appears to muddy the waters.

For as I have implied *they* do not seem to be able to set the direction of argument *at all*: the secondary evidence in favour of a belief's being justified, for the orthodox coherentist, *must be* that that belief coheres with the rest of an epistemic subject *s*'s belief system, i.e., that it has the epistemic property of cohering with the rest of *s*'s belief system; and the epistemic principle employed in a reason to believe that proposition *must be* expressed by the conditional statement 'If a belief coheres with the rest of *s*'s belief system, then that belief is likely to be true' (where obviously what it means for a belief to cohere with the rest of *s*'s belief system is as yet an open question). Thus it can only be the evidence in favour of some proposition which dictates the direction of argument. Which is to suggest: these latter two elements of a reason to believe appear to escape the ambit of the coherentist's appeal to coherence. Surely, then, the coherentist must tell us something about them and how they fit in to his appeal?

The question I mean to push in bringing up these other elements concerns the epistemic sufficiency of the appeal to coherence if it only appears to encompass evidence in favour of some proposition, and not a reason to believe that proposition *as a whole*. That is, does that appeal enable the coherentist to escape even the epistemic regress argument, in all its *apparent* formality? For whilst the appeal to coherence *may* be able to escape the charge of circularity raised against that option (b) of the Agrippan trilemma at the level of the evidence in favour of some proposition by appeal to coherence, it is not clear that that appeal succeeds at the level of secondary evidence, nor at the level of an epistemic principle. But to have provided an even formally

sufficient answer to the Agrippan problematic that appeal must be applicable to all those levels, as we effectively saw with the sense-datum theorist.

The denial of the second assumption underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument ultimately led the committed foundationalist to posit an item—a sense-content—*s*'s immediate experience or direct apprehension of which (something I argued that itself had to be understood as a cognitive item if such a position was to be epistemically intelligible) simply did not—*could not*, perhaps—require justification, at least if the foundationalist was to undermine the Agrippan problematic. That claim, i.e., that *s*'s immediate experience or direct apprehension of a sense-content—as a sense-datum—which whilst cognitive did not itself require justification, was, I argued, epistemically groundless, such that the sense-datum theorist was faced with the dual result that: (i), there was no reason why we should not treat *s*'s immediate experience or direct apprehension of a sense-content as just another belief; and (ii), since we should treat it as a belief we still faced the options laid out in the Agrippan trilemma. (As, of course, the foundationalist accepts the first assumption underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument.) The point being in regards to the coherentist's appeal to coherence that the foundationalist's response to the epistemic regress argument enabled him to respond—*unsuccessfully*, but no matter—to *each* of the *other three* applications of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan problematic. That is what made it a formally sufficient response to that argument.

To say that a reason to believe some proposition need not always be epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns, as the foundationalist does in response to the epistemic regress argument in denying the second assumption underlying its premise, is to *already* say that all the elements of a reason to believe are themselves not always epistemically distinct from that which *they* concern—it encompasses all those elements in originally pertaining to the level of their complex in a reason to believe some proposition. The coherentist, on the other hand, simply seems to be ignoring the issues of secondary evidence and epistemic principles in making his appeal to coherence. We should assume, therefore, that his position is to be questioned from the off. And I will suggest that this is because of the fact that the coherentist fails to outright reject either of the assumptions underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument, but most importantly the *first* such assumption, which entails that his position falls headlong into foundationalism. The implicit suggestion being that any position which does not outright reject that first assumption can *only* respond to the Agrippan problematic in the manner of foundationalism.

## §5.2. Coherentism as Foundationalism

When the coherentist appeals to coherence what is he appealing to? Bonjour writes:

What, then, is coherence? Intuitively, coherence is a matter of how well a body of beliefs “hangs together”: how well its component beliefs fit together, agree or dovetail with each other, so as to produce an organized, tightly structured system of beliefs, rather than either a helter-skelter collection or a set of conflicting subsystems. It is reasonably clear that this “hanging together” depends on the various sorts of inferential, evidential, and explanatory relations which obtain among the various members of a system of beliefs, and especially on the more holistic and systematic of these.<sup>116</sup>

Or more comprehensively:

coherence requires a high degree of inferential connectedness in the system of beliefs, involving relations of necessitation, both strictly logical and otherwise, together with probabilistic connections of various kinds. One important aspect of this is what might be called probabilistic consistency, i.e. the minimizing of relations between beliefs in the system in virtue of which some are highly unlikely to be true in relation to others.... [Moreover, the] coherence of a system of belief is surely enhanced to the extent that some parts of the system are explained by others, thus reducing the degree to which the beliefs of the system portray unexplained anomalies.<sup>117</sup>

Now, we must note that what is being called upon to do the work of enabling the direction of argument to go both ways within this rough characterisation of the notion of coherence are ‘the more holistic and systematic’ ‘inferential, evidential, and explanatory relations’ which the coherentist posits between beliefs, i.e., those which entail that ‘some parts of the system are explained by others’. For ‘relations of necessitation, both strictly logical and otherwise’ and, indeed, ‘probabilistic connections of various kinds’, do not seem sufficient to escape the charge of circularity levelled against option (b) of the Agrippan trilemma, i.e., enable the necessary local/global distinction to be drawn.

That is, at least in the first case of logical necessitation, merely ensuring that *s*’s belief system is logically consistent is not enough to ensure that the direction of argument can go both ways. To say that *s*’s belief system is logically consistent is to say that it contains no contradictories, e.g., belief both in the propositions that *p* and that not-*p*. But note that logical relations *are not* inferential relations—they do not dictate

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p. 93.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p. 124

which way an inference between belief in the propositions  $p$  and  $q$  *should* go. As Williams writes:

For example, it would be a mistake to think of Modus Ponens as the rule that, if we believe that  $P$  and also believe that  $P$  entails  $Q$ , we should believe  $Q$ . Perhaps  $Q$  is so implausible that we should rethink our premises. Deductive logic, though it puts constraints on belief systems, does not tell us what to believe....<sup>118</sup>

Therefore, there is no reason to think that, given as always that  $s$  can understand the propositions involved, a logically consistent regress of conditional inferential justification which loops around upon itself, i.e., (b), and so falls to the charge of circularity, could not be logically consistent, in the sense that it contained no contradictions. It may nonetheless be paradoxical, however that is a different matter.

Moreover, this further goes for probabilistic consistency, a point which also brings us to the nub of the problem with coherentism. For firstly, there is no reason to expect that a logically consistent regress of conditional inferential justification which loops around upon itself, i.e., (b), and so falls to the charge of circularity, could not also be probabilistically consistent. That is, there is no reason to think that such a regress of conditional inferential justification need hold beliefs which imply the probable falsity of any of the other beliefs in that regress. And, moreover, need dictate which way the direction of argument must go as a factor *independent* of  $s$ 's understanding of the propositions involved. It is at this point, then, that the coherentist must appeal to his inferential, evidential, and explanatory relations as enabling non-linear or holistic inference. For otherwise he cannot escape the evidential regress argument: a probabilistically consistent regress of conditional inferential justification which loops around upon itself cannot escape the evidential regress argument. For whilst it may be probabilistically consistent it would nonetheless never allow us to see any of its constituent beliefs as *actually* probable, as opposed to their being *conditionally* probable—we would simply follow the probabilities around indefinitely. But if inference between beliefs can be considered non-linearly, such that the direction of argument is not all one way, then we can see those constituent beliefs as mutually reinforcing themselves—we can calculate probabilities in more than one direction, i.e., *actual* probabilities. It is possible, then, for the coherentist to respond to the evidential regress argument.

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<sup>118</sup> M. Williams, *UD*, p. 281.

Indeed, we may assume for the sake of argument that the propositional content of every belief constituent of a belief system is absolutely certain, such that belief in them is infallible, as well as, in a sense, the belief system as a whole. That is, we may assume that the notion of coherence somehow dictates that only infallible beliefs can be constitutive of a coherent belief system. For we have seen nothing to suggest that the orthodox coherentist does *not* have to deal with the evidential regress argument, and it is only some such move which would enable him to escape it without his having to posit some belief *without* the system which was itself infallible such that the probabilities of the beliefs *within* the system could themselves be considered actual rather than conditional.

So secondly, as matters stand surely the conclusion which must be drawn is that the coherentist is in the same situation as the appearance theorist would be if he could in fact claim that experiential beliefs were infallible, i.e., he would still in any case be undone by the requirement that for *s* to accept any such belief as basic he must know that it has that epistemic property, as well as that that epistemic property is indicative of the truth of any belief which exhibits it. For whilst we can simply assume that the notion of coherence encompasses the infallibility of the constituent beliefs of a belief system, *s* must be able to infer that a belief that *p* is infallible *because* it coheres with the rest of his beliefs, i.e., that that belief has the epistemic property of cohering with the rest of his beliefs *and so* the corresponding property of infallibility. This is suggestive of the fact that the coherentist's position, idealised as I have made it such that it can escape the evidential regress argument, is an exact formal analogue of the idealised appearance theorist's position, but at the level of belief systems instead of particular beliefs, and, moreover, subject to the same objections.

As Bonjour writes:

According to a coherence theory of empirical justification... the... justification of an empirical belief derives entirely from its coherence with the believer's overall system of empirical beliefs and not at all from any sort of factor outside that system. What we must now ask is whether and how the fact that a belief coheres in this way is cognitively accessible to the believer himself, so that it can give *him* a reason for accepting the belief.<sup>119</sup>

That is, how can *s* have a reason to accept the belief that *p* as justified? This would appear to require that *s* have *a grasp*, so to speak, of the totality of his belief system in order that he can at least estimate, perhaps, whether the putative addition of that belief

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<sup>119</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 101, original emphasis.

to that system would entail an increase or decrease in the latter's coherence. 'Such a grasp', Bonjour suggests, 'would presumably take the form of a set of metabeliefs (or one comprehensive metabelief) specifying the contents of [s's]... system of beliefs'.<sup>120</sup> The problem, however, is that the coherentist *cannot* claim 'that these metabeliefs too are justified by virtue of their coherence with the rest of [s's]... system of beliefs'.<sup>121</sup> As Bonjour writes:

How can my metabelief B<sub>2</sub> that I have a certain other belief B<sub>1</sub> be justified for me by appeal to the fact that B<sub>2</sub> coheres with my total system of beliefs if my very grasp of that system depends on the justification of B<sub>2</sub> and other similar beliefs? How, that is, can my reason for accepting B<sub>2</sub> be its coherence with my total system of beliefs when I have no justification apart from an appeal to B<sub>2</sub> and similar beliefs for thinking that I even have that system of beliefs?<sup>122</sup>

In other words, if coherence is the ultimate standard of empirical justification for the coherentist, then it cannot be the case that *s*'s grasp of the coherence of his belief system is itself justified by an appeal to coherence, for it is exactly what he must already have—and justifiably—if any appeal to coherence is to even be made. That being so, how can *s*'s grasp of the coherence of his belief system be anything but unjustified since in its case *no* appeal to coherence can be made?

We have now reached the point at which the appeal to coherence breaks down, i.e., the point at which the other two elements of a reason to believe some proposition over and above evidence in its favour have to be dealt with by the coherentist. And simply put, if he is to endeavour to hold on to the possibility of empirical justification he cannot do so without importing certain foundationalist machinery into his theory. Those elements really do escape the ambit of the coherentist's appeal to coherence. Indeed, Bonjour seeks to deal with the problem of the justification of *s*'s grasp of the coherence of his belief system by employing the notion of a 'Doxastic Presumption': 'The idea is to mitigate the foregoing objection [*re* the unjustified nature of *s*'s grasp of the coherence of his belief system] by treating the metabelief [or metabeliefs] in question as an unjustified hypothesis in relation to which issues of justification are *conditionally* assessed, yielding results of the general form: *if* my representation of my system of beliefs is correct, then such-and-such a particular belief is justified in the

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<sup>120</sup> Bonjour, 'The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism', p. 126.

<sup>121</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 102.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, p. 102.



sense of being likely to be true'.<sup>123</sup> The underlying thought behind the 'Doxastic Presumption' being that any challenge to *s*'s grasp of the coherence of his belief system presupposes that he *in fact* has some such system, whether or not it is reflected by that grasp of his, and thus that that grasp is in some sense justified. But we should not accept such a presumption; conditional justification, as has been stated previously, is simply *not* non-conditional or actual justification. As Williams writes:

Of course, the word 'presumption' is carefully chosen. If our supposed knowledge of our won belief-system is allowed to be questionable, it will need to be backed up by some justifying inference. This can hardly be coherentist: such an inference would require us to estimate the coherence of our beliefs about our beliefs. We would then have to presume these beliefs to be more or less accurate, or else produce a meta-meta-argument about the coherence of our beliefs about our beliefs about our beliefs... and so on without end. Invoking a 'presumption' is meant to prevent any such regress getting started. In effect, it confers *foundational status* on the relevant kind of self-knowledge.<sup>124</sup>

That is, the coherentist, like the foundationalist before him, is cornered into claiming that there are some beliefs which simply *do not* require justification from whence our empirical knowledge springs, *except again for no principled reason*.

So the difference between the foundationalist and the coherentist seems merely to be the theory of concepts which they cleave to. But the move to a coherence theory of concepts does not seem to have paid any dividends in any case, the coherentist just as mired in the Agrippan problematic as the foundationalist. However, it must be noted that the coherentist, at least as I have presented his position, simply assumes such a theory; he tells no story concerning *how s* comes by his concepts. Indeed, he tells no story concerning *how s* comes by the belief that he has beliefs, he simply presumes that *s* has beliefs, and so that he believes that he has beliefs. And whilst that implied question is a rather strange question—how can *s* come to believe that he has beliefs?—in that it is suggestive of the fact that *s* can have beliefs without knowing that he has beliefs, I take it that in regards to *something like* the Doxastic Presumption it might be less objectionable if such a story could be told.

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<sup>123</sup> Bonjour, *SEK*, p. 101, and Bonjour, 'The Dialectic of Foundationalism and Coherentism', pp. 126—127, original emphasis.

<sup>124</sup> M. Williams, *PK*, p. 137, original emphasis.

## Chapter Six: Sellars and the Agrippan Problematic

### Introduction

In this final chapter we shall turn to Sellars's positive contribution to the debate around the Agrippan problematic.

In the first section I present a short, descriptive exposition of Sellars's attempt to explain how we can understand thoughts as theoretically introduced entities. I effectively assume that something along these lines is possible. The import of this idea is that the very ability of *s* to think is bound up with his ability to use language, *and not the other way round*.

In the next three sections (§§6.2—6.4) I turn to Sellars's proposed structure of empirical knowledge as set out in Part VIII of *EPM*.<sup>125</sup> I begin §6.2 by characterising Sellars's negative specification of his own position, as over against foundationalism and coherentism. This already makes it clear that he will challenge the first assumption underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument. I then turn to the two criteria he thinks an instance of non-inferentially justified knowledge must satisfy, i.e., the criteria of *ultimacy* (that something is non-inferential) and *authority* (that something is justified), and what I call his 'first-run position', a proposed structure of knowledge built around the notion of a report, which he will go on to complicate and extend in an attempt to satisfy those two criteria.

In §6.3 I turn to the two problems Sellars thinks his first-run position faces in attempting to satisfy the two criteria of ultimacy and authority. The first of these problems involves an appeal to a novel kind of linguistic rule, *which Sellars fails to adequately specify*. The second involves the introduction of one part of the non-traditional understanding of what it is for a belief to be justified that has been mentioned on various occasions above (see, e.g., the introduction and §2.2). This section ends with the characterisation of a specific kind of regress of justification that applies to Sellars's position, the most fundamental form of which is to be associated with the epistemic regress argument.

In §6.4 I turn to the epistemic regress argument as it arises *vis-à-vis* Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge. I give a structural characterisation of his position, which is akin to foundationalism, except that it demands that instances of *both*

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<sup>125</sup> I will drop the reference to 'empirical' knowledge for the rest of this chapter. That is, from here on, 'knowledge', 'belief', etc., is really shorthand for 'empirical knowledge', 'empirical belief', etc.

observational or particular *and* general knowledge occupy his foundation, in that, whilst they are not inferentially connected to each other, their (non-inferential) justification nonetheless presupposes the justification of other items within that foundation, in a sense to be specified (see also §6.2). However, whilst I take it that Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge, as set out in Part VIII of *EPM*, may escape the epistemic regress argument, it certainly fails to escape Bonjour's argument.

In §6.5 I extricate Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge from Bonjour's argument by characterising the novel kind of linguistic rule we find him appealing to in §6.3. This further enables me to specify the second part of the non-traditional understanding of what it is for a belief to be justified. However, again Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge faces a regress.

In §6.6, making use of one final idea from Sellars concerning the very possibility of epistemic agency, I illustrate how his proposed structure of knowledge, suitably amended, can escape the regress we met at the end of §6.5. Indeed, I illustrate how that structure can answer the claim at the heart of the Agrippan sceptic's argumentative methodology, i.e., that any claim to knowledge can always be challenged (see §2.2), by invoking the two parts of the non-traditional understanding of what it is for a belief to be justified specifically in regards to, respectively, *s*'s beliefs that 'I think' and 'I understand *l*' (or: 'If I think, then I understand *l*'). I then make use of the final idea from Sellars to show how observational knowledge can be considered non-inferentially justified in virtue of these beliefs being justified.

Notice that I have not brought up either the evidential regress argument or the problem of the criterion. I will explicitly deal with these two applications of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic in regards to Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge in the conclusion.

### §6.1. The Theoretical Introduction of Thoughts

As we have seen (§4.2), Sellars suggests that there are *two* kinds or levels of explanation that could be given for why *s* might report that 'This looks red' or 'I see that *x* is red', given his analysis of looks- and sees-talk as reporting on the propositional contents of experiences. Moreover, I have suggested that (again §4.2), in regards to the Agrippan problematic, we only need concern ourselves with the less searching explanation which points out that 'it is perfectly proper to answer the question "Why does this object look red?" by saying "Because it is an orange object looked at in such

and such circumstances.” It is from within the conceptual resources we have available for giving *that* explanation that we are to explain the possibility of empirical knowledge. Nonetheless, Sellars thinks we have to go *someway* to even be able to provide *that* explanation for looks- and sees-talk. The question is: what must be *added* to is-talk, i.e., the holistic conceptual resources required for making *strict* observation reports, that enables looks- and sees-talk to be possible?

Notice that even the less searching explanation makes reference to Sellars’s contention that experiences make or contain claims or assertions, i.e., that experiences have propositional contents. That which he highlights as the most important aspect of sees-talk is that it involves the endorsement of the claim that an experience contains. That is, the most important *epistemological* aspect of sees-talk, at least in regards to the Agrippan problematic, is that it makes necessary reference to a *subject of experience qua* epistemic subject. Only an epistemic subject can endorse or not endorse a claim contained by an experience. Unlike a strict observation report, i.e., a report which involves is-talk, a looks- or sees-statement in some sense shows the epistemic subject at work in their elicitation: the question of whether to endorse or not to endorse has come up. For Sellars, however, this ensures that we cannot make such statements unless we have the resources of *mentalist discourse*, something which he takes to require a story concerning how we come by the concepts constitutive of that discourse. That is the first stage of what we might call his ‘Myth of Jones’.

Sellars attempts to defend what he calls a ‘revised classical analysis of our common-sense conception of thoughts’.<sup>126</sup> This conception is different in kind to an account that has thoughts as *overt* ‘verbal or linguistic episodes’ together with what Sellars everywhere calls ‘verbal imagery’, those *covert* episodes in which we speak to ourselves, privately.<sup>127</sup> He complains that surely there are not enough such episodes, of either kind, ‘to account for all the cases in which it would be argued that a person is thinking’?<sup>128</sup> Moreover, it is different in kind from what is called ‘behaviourism’ in which all thinking is subsumed under *observable*—both actually and possibly—episodes of ‘intelligent behaviour’.<sup>129</sup> As Sellars writes:

This, however, runs into the difficulty that whenever we try to explain what we mean by calling a piece of *nonhabitual* behaviour intelligent, we seem to find it necessary to do so in terms of *thinking*. The uncomfortable feeling

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<sup>126</sup> Sellars, *EPM*, §47, p. 90.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, §46, p. 88, original emphasis.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, §46, pp. 88—89.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid*, §46, p. 89.

will not be downed that the dispositional account of thoughts in terms of intelligent behaviour is covertly circular.<sup>130</sup>

Finally, it is based upon, although importantly dissimilar in certain epistemological respects, from the classical tradition's claim 'that there is a family of episodes, neither overt verbal behaviour nor verbal imagery, which are *thoughts*, and that both overt verbal behaviour and verbal imagery owe their meaningfulness to the fact that they stand to these *thoughts* in the unique relation of "expressing" them'.<sup>131</sup> The classical tradition normally adds to this claim that such episodes are introspectable—'Indeed, it was normally believed that they could not occur without being known to occur'.<sup>132</sup> But Sellars denies that thoughts are to be considered infallibly knowable and, indeed, introspectable in anything like that classical sense. He takes the classical tradition to have perpetuated, even originated, that confusion which besets the sense-datum theorist, i.e., the confusing of thoughts with appearances. Instead, he proposes that 'If we purge the classical tradition of [that]... confusion..., it becomes the idea that to each of us belongs a stream of episodes, not themselves immediate experiences, to which we have privileged, but by no means either invariable or infallible access'.<sup>133</sup>

Having negatively identified his conception of thoughts via its differentiation from these others, Sellars then sets about defining and defending it. He does this by telling a story about some mythological ancestors of ours, and one in particular—his famous 'Jones'.<sup>134</sup> That story begins from a point at which those mythological ancestors have what Sellars calls a 'Rylean language', 'a language of which the fundamental descriptive vocabulary speaks of public properties of public objects located in Space and enduring through Time'.<sup>135</sup> This language also has the 'logical operations of conjunction, disjunction, negation, and quantification, but especially of the subjunctive conditional'.<sup>136</sup> The question Sellars then pushes is one concerning what would have to be added to *this language to enable talk of thoughts*, objects not as yet known to our mythical ancestors.

At this juncture Sellars adds to this 'Rylean language' the resources of *semantical discourse*, i.e., the ability of these mythical ancestors of ours to make

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, §46, p. 89, original emphasis.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, §47, p. 89, original emphasis.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, §47, p. 89.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, §47, p. 90.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid, §53, p. 98.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, §48, p. 91.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, §48, p. 91.

metalinguistic statements *about* their language—what *words mean*, what *statements refer to*, etc. Sellars writes:

Let it be granted, then, that these mythical ancestors of ours are able to characterize each other's verbal behaviour in semantical terms; that, in other words, they not only can talk about each other's predictions as causes and effects, and as indicators (with greater or lesser reliability) of other verbal and nonverbal states of affairs, but can also say of these verbal productions that they *mean* thus and so, that they say *that* such and such, that they are true, false, etc.<sup>137</sup>

Now, since the overriding characteristic of thoughts is 'their *intentionality, reference, or aboutness*', Sellars takes it that the addition of semantical discourse to the resources of the Rylean language puts its mythical speakers in, or close to, a position to begin to talk about thoughts.<sup>138</sup> This is because of the *structural similarities* between semantical talk concerning overt verbal behaviour and *mentalistic talk* of thoughts—talk which concerns what *concepts apply to*, what *the propositional contents of beliefs are about*, etc.

Yet Sellars does not want to just *identify* semantical talk *with* mentalistic talk, otherwise we would be back with the first conception of thoughts rejected above. Nor does he want to return to the classical tradition's conception of thoughts in which semantical discourse ends up *being derivative of* mentalistic discourse, in which 'overt verbal performances' are 'to be analyzed in terms of talk about the intentionality of the mental episodes which are "expressed" by' such 'overt performances'.<sup>139</sup> If the latter were the case we would be back to the *epistemic primacy* of the mental. The way out of this dilemma, for Sellars, is to turn to that second, behaviouristic conception of thoughts.

But first, however, he enriches the Rylean language with the resources of *theoretical discourse*. Not only do our mythical ancestors have semantical talk, but they can also 'elaborate, without methodological sophistication, crude, sketchy, and vague theories to explain why things which are similar in their observable properties differ in their causal properties, and things which are similar in their causal properties differ in their observable properties'.<sup>140</sup> That is, they can construct *theoretical models* to explain why some observable states of affairs behave as they do, models whose *unobservable* postulates are correlated with *other* observable states of affairs *not* in the domain to be

<sup>137</sup> Ibid, §49, p. 92, original emphasis.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, §50, p. 93, original emphasis.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, §50, p. 94.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, §52, p. 98.

explained in that the model describes ‘a domain of familiar objects behaving in familiar ways such that we can see how the phenomena to be explained [*re those first* observable states of affairs] would arise if they consisted of this sort of thing’, i.e., things *analogous* to those *latter* observable states of affairs.<sup>141</sup> All such models, however, are accompanied by a ‘commentary which *qualifies* or *limits*—but not precisely or in all respects—the analogy between the familiar objects and the entities which are being introduced by the theory’.<sup>142</sup> The relationship between the language of observation and the language of theory is thus *one way but constrained*. The postulated entities are to explain why some observable states of affairs behave as they do by reference to the behaviour of some other observable states of affairs (their model), but the postulated entities, based in important respects upon the latter observable states of affairs do not just exhibit their behaviour *again*, but at the unobserved level. The ‘commentary’ sets important limits on the analogy.

It is at this point that Jones makes his presence felt by offering *a theory of thoughts*. Sellars takes that second conception of thoughts assayed above, that one which subsumes thinking under actually or possibly observable episodes of intelligent behaviour, to be committed to a needless *methodological restriction*. That restriction is the ‘thought that Behaviourism is committed to the idea that the concepts of a behaviouristic psychology must be... analyzable’ ‘into concepts pertaining to overt behaviour’—‘that properly introduced behaviouristic concepts must be built by explicit definition—in the broadest sense—from a basic vocabulary pertaining to overt behaviour’.<sup>143</sup> But, *contra* ‘philosophical’ behaviourism, Jones does not take *his* theory to be so restricted. He commits himself only to ‘the behaviouristic requirement that all concepts [pertaining to thoughts] should be *introduced* in terms of a basic vocabulary pertaining to overt behaviour’, but takes this to be ‘compatible with the idea that some behaviouristic concepts are to be introduced as *theoretical* concepts’, i.e., as concepts of unobservable entities and their qualities and relations conceived in reference to observable states of affairs—observable behaviour—but allowed *a measure of independence* from the latter in how *they* are supposed to behave (the effect of the commentary, then).<sup>144</sup> Such a behaviourism as Jones’s, Sellars calls ‘methodological’ behaviourism.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, §51, p. 96.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, §51, p. 96, original emphasis.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, §54, pp. 99—100, original emphasis.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid, §54, p. 100, original emphasis.

The Rylean language of our mythical ancestors, prior to Jones's intervention, can now be characterised 'as not only a *behaviouristic* language, but a behaviouristic language which is restricted to the *non-theoretical* vocabulary of a behaviouristic psychology'.<sup>145</sup> Sellars writes:

Suppose, now, that in the attempt to account for the fact that his fellow men behave intelligently not only when their conduct is threaded on a string of overt verbal episodes—that is to say, as *we* would put it, when they “think out loud”—but also when no detectable verbal output is present, Jones develops a theory according to which overt utterances are but the culmination of a process which begins with certain inner episodes. *And let us suppose that his model for these episodes which initiate the events which culminate in overt verbal behaviour is that of overt verbal behaviour itself. In other words, using the language of the model, the theory is to the effect that overt verbal behaviour is the culmination of a process which begins with “inner speech.”*<sup>146</sup>

But note that ‘*inner speech*’—Jones calls instances of such ‘thoughts’—is *not* the verbal imagery of that first conception of thoughts we have already met. Thoughts, by Jones's theory, are “unobserved,” “nonempirical” “inner” episodes’ modelled on episodes of observable verbal behaviour, and to which the categories of semantical discourse are, to an extent qualified by Jones's commentary to his model, applicable.<sup>147</sup> That is, they are episodes which are about things as statements refer to things, whose constituents—concepts—are applicable as words are meaningful, but not necessarily along exactly the same lines as the overt statements or words which constitute his model.

Indeed, in the other direction Jones is also careful not to completely sever the tie between overt verbal behaviour and thoughts. In fact, the concept “‘thinking that-*p*’, where this means ‘having the thought occur to one that-*p*’, has as its *primary* sense *saying* ‘*p*’ and a derivative sense in which it stands for a short-term proximate propensity to say ‘*p*’”.<sup>148</sup> Thus the fundamental concept pertaining to thought is actually one which pertains to an episode of overt verbal behaviour, *not* to be understood as an *expression* of a thought (a ‘linguistic action’), as in the classical tradition's conception of thoughts, but as instead a ‘candidly *thinking-out-loud-that-p*’.<sup>149</sup> Such a candid thinking-out-loud-that-*p* is *not a performance* in which a deliberate use of words is made to achieve some purpose or other, but one which is spontaneous (*non-deliberative*). As Sellars writes: ‘Thus, at the primary level, instead of analyzing the

<sup>145</sup> Ibid, §56, p. 102, original emphasis.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid, §56, pp. 102—103, original emphasis.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, §58, p. 104.

<sup>148</sup> Sellars, ‘The Structure of Knowledge’, II, §12, p. 319, original emphasis.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, II, §12, p. 319, original emphasis.



intentionality or aboutness of verbal behavior in terms of its expressing or being used to express classically conceived thoughts or beliefs, we should recognize that this verbal behavior *is already thinking in its own right*, and its intentionality or aboutness is simply the appropriateness of classifying it in terms which relate to the linguistic behavior of the group to which it belongs'.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, he remarks: 'Thus, it should be noted that Jones' theory, as I have sketched it, is perfectly compatible with the idea that the ability to have thoughts is acquired in the process of acquiring overt speech and that only after overt speech is well established, can "inner speech" occur without its overt culmination'.<sup>151</sup>

The final flourish of Jones's theory is then to enable our mythical ancestors, with his theory of thoughts now added to the resources of their Rylean language, to acquire the ability to report on both the thoughts of others *as well as their own*. In other words, to take thoughts *out of* the theoretical realm and *into* the non-theoretical one of everyday discourse. This is in an effort to allay the—correct and proper—fear that there is something ever-so paradoxical about saying 'that concepts pertaining to thinking are theoretical concepts'.<sup>152</sup> As Sellars writes:

once our fictitious ancestor, Jones, has developed the theory that overt verbal behaviour is the expression of thoughts, and taught his compatriots to make use of the theory in interpreting each other's behaviour, it is but a short step to the use of this language in self-description. Thus, when Tom, watching Dick, has behavioral evidence which warrants the use of the sentence (in the language of the theory) "Dick is thinking 'p'" (or 'Dick is thinking that p'), Dick, using the same behavioral evidence, can say, in the language of the theory, 'I am thinking "p"' (or 'I am thinking that p'). And it now turns out—need it have?—that Dick can be trained to give reasonably reliable self-descriptions, using the language of the theory, without having to observe his overt behavior. Jones brings this about, roughly, by applauding utterances by Dick of "I am thinking that p" when the behavioral evidence strongly supports the theoretical statement "Dick is thinking that p"; and by frowning on utterances of "I am thinking that p," when the evidence does not support this theoretical statement. Our ancestors begin to speak of the privileged access each of us has to his own thoughts. *What began as a language with a purely theoretical use has gained a reporting role.*<sup>153</sup>

Thus, the manner in which Sellars attempts to effect the transition between thoughts *qua* theoretical entities and thoughts *qua*, well, *thoughts* is by providing a reporting role for

<sup>150</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, 'Language as Thought and as Communication', p 80, in Wilfrid Sellars, *In the Space of Reasons*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 57—80.

<sup>151</sup> Sellars, *EPM*, §58, p. 105.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, §59, p. 106.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, §59, pp. 106—107, original emphasis.

first-, second-, and third-person attributions of such. We have already seen that, for Sellars, reports are *not* to be considered *the conclusions of inferences*. His idea is that if we can report on something then it must exist. Perhaps the easiest way to see how such reporting is possible in the case of thoughts is simply by noting that, in the first instance, Jones's theory of thoughts makes them *observable*, in that candid verbal behaviour is to be considered, not the expression of thought, *but thought itself*. Sellars comments: 'As I see it, this story helps us understand that concepts pertaining to such inner episodes as thoughts are primarily and essentially *intersubjective*, as intersubjective as the concept of a positron, and that the reporting role of these concepts—the fact that each of us has privileged access to his thoughts—constitutes a dimension of the use of these concepts which is *built on* and *presupposes* this intersubjective status'.<sup>154</sup> By Jones's theory, behavioural evidence is built into the very concepts of mentalistic discourse.

We are now ready to turn to the issue of that less searching explanation of looks-(and sees-) talk as reporting on the propositional contents of experiences. For those propositional contents will belong in the newly acquired framework of thoughts that Jones's theory has enabled. That is, where before thoughts were introduced all the concepts our mythical ancestors had in regards to experiences 'were those of overt verbal *reports*, made, for example, in the context of looking at an object in standard conditions', reports which made no reference to a subject of experience *qua* epistemic subject, and so experiences themselves, with the introduction of thoughts this framework can be enlarged to encompass such subjects and thus experiences.<sup>155</sup> So whereas if someone said that 'Dick *reported* that the table is green', that person would be committing himself *only* to the truth of what Dick reported, i.e., the table being green, if he had instead said, which he now can with the introduction of thoughts, 'Dick *saw* that the table is green', that person would be *both* ascribing to Dick the *experience* of the table being green—the propositional content 'the table is green'—*as well as* endorsing that content, i.e., the table being green.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, if someone said that 'Dick *reported* that the table is green, but Dick's report was not made in standard conditions', that person would not be committing themselves to the truth of what Dick reported; if he had instead said, again which he now can with the introduction of thoughts, 'The table *looks* green to Dick', that person would be ascribing to Dick the

<sup>154</sup> Ibid, §59, p. 107, original emphasis.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid, §60, p. 108, original emphasis.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, §60, p. 108, original emphasis.

experience of the table being green but not endorsing the propositional content of that experience.<sup>157</sup>

Jones's introduction of the framework of thoughts allows our mythical ancestors to locate a possible locus of mismatch between what is now revealed as the mind and the mind-independent. That is, before the introduction of thoughts our mythical ancestors may have wondered what went wrong between something's being the case and their reporting on looking that something's being the case (the *act* of looking, not the experience of, note) such that they made false reports, since all their reports pertained only to the object looked at. And whilst they could cope with this by adding the rider to reports 'but this (or that) report wasn't made in standard conditions' where appropriate, this would still have left a certain incompatibility in their conceptual framework between the fact that objects don't change their colours and the fact that they can make false reports concerning such objects, and ultimately make false reports concerning objects which aren't even there. The introduction of thoughts, and specifically perceptions and (apparent or actual) *mis*-perceptions, even if only considered in terms of experiences having propositional contents, allows our mythical ancestors to understand that there is *something* there when such false reports are made, even when there is no *object* there being looked at. Thus is allowed the concept of an experience, a subject of experience, and, we might say, an epistemic subject.

## §6.2. The Two Criteria of Non-Inferential Knowledge and Reports

The essential place to start an overview of Sellars's epistemology is with his (infamous) discussion of whether 'Empirical Knowledge has a Foundation' in Part VIII of *EPM*. He begins Part VIII of *EPM* with the following passage:

One of the forms taken by the Myth of the Given is the idea that there is, indeed *must be*, a structure of particular matter of fact such that (a) each fact can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presuppose no other knowledge of particular matter of fact, or of general truths; and (b) such that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeal for all factual claims—particular of general—about the world. It is important to note that I characterized the knowledge of fact belonging to this stratum as not only noninferential, but as pre-supposing no knowledge of other matter of fact, whether particular or general. It might be thought that this is a redundancy, that knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes

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<sup>157</sup> Or not all of it: just the part which concerns the table.

knowledge of other facts *must* be inferential. This, however, as I hope to show, is itself an episode in the Myth.<sup>158</sup>

The first thing to note in regards to unpacking this passage is that, for our purposes, if Sellars labels something as a form ‘taken by the Myth of the Given’, or again an ‘episode in the Myth’, he objects to it. I do not need to state exactly what the Myth of the Given is. That would be an extremely difficult—and thankless—task, and certain of its lineaments have already been covered in the foregoing. (Obviously its title refers to something like Lewis’s appeal to the given [see §3.3], but Sellars’s use of the Myth goes far beyond a critique of Lewis’s position.) With that in mind, we can understand Sellars to be objecting to two distinct positions in this passage.

The first is clearly foundationalism, in any of its guises. A ‘structure of knowledge’ that appeals to the possibility of an instance of knowledge that ‘can not only be noninferentially known to be the case, but presupposes no other knowledge of particular matter of fact, or of general truths’, is a structure of knowledge that appeals to the idea that a reason to believe some proposition need not be epistemically distinct from a belief in the proposition it concerns. Note how Sellars qualifies this appeal. In doing so he leaves it open that an instance of knowledge might be non-inferentially known to be the case and yet presuppose *other* knowledge of particular matter of fact, or of general truths. The claim ‘that the noninferential knowledge of facts belonging to this structure constitutes the ultimate court of appeals for all factual claims—particular and general—about the world’ is then the necessary corollary of the foundationalist’s appeal. For again, clearly, if there are instances of knowledge, then some of those instances will be inferentially justified (§2.1). That being the case, any appeal to non-inferential justification entails that there will be two strata of knowledge: non-inferential and inferential, and the latter will rest on the former.

The second position which Sellars objects to in the passage is one that assumes ‘that knowledge (not belief or conviction, but knowledge) which logically presupposes knowledge of other facts *must* be inferential’, i.e., coherentism. But if Sellars objects to *both* foundationalism *and* coherentism, then by elimination it can *only* be the case that the ‘redundancy’ he refers to is the position he in fact endorses. And that redundancy *must* be an appeal to the idea that a belief can justify another belief in a way other than via inferential connection between the two, i.e., he must challenge the first assumption underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument. But we can also say something further here: if Sellars is going to challenge that assumption, then it must also

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid, §32, pp. 68—69, original emphasis.

be the case that he argues for *something like* the foundationalist's proposed structure of knowledge. Again, any kind of appeal to non-inferential justification will ensure that its resultant—a putative structure of knowledge—will necessarily involve two strata of knowledge.

So Sellars will challenge the first assumption underlying the premise of the epistemic regress argument. To draw out how he will challenge that assumption, we need to work towards the specific juncture at which that argument arises *vis-à-vis* Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge. And to do this we need to zero in on his habit of talking about non-inferential justification in terms of the notions of *ultimacy* and *authority*.

He sets out what he sees to be the problem of non-inferential justification in the following way:

Now, the idea of... a privileged stratum of knowledge is a familiar one, though not without its difficulties. Knowledge pertaining to this level is *noninferential*, yet it is, after all, *knowledge*. It is *ultimate*, yet it has *authority*.<sup>159</sup>

Sellars's invocation of the notions of ultimacy and authority suggests a division of labour. That an instance of knowledge *is ultimate* implies that it is not inferred from any other instances of knowledge. This is why it stops a regress of justification; indeed, this is obviously why it is *non-inferential*. That an instance of knowledge *has authority*, on the other hand, implies that the termination of that regress is justified, in that the instance of knowledge with which the regress terminates is justified. These are, then, the two criteria Sellars thinks that an instance of knowledge must satisfy if it is to be considered non-inferentially justified. And note that this subtle diremption, on Sellars's part, of what goes in to making an instance of knowledge non-inferentially justified is further indicative of the fact that he will pursue a line of investigation different to that of the foundationalist. For, whilst it *must* be the case that an instance of knowledge is ultimate if it is to be considered non-inferential, treating of these two criteria separately implies that it will be justified in a manner other than its *merely being* ultimate.

A little further on in Part VIII of *EPM*, Sellars recapitulates what he takes to be the problem of non-inferential justification, and in so doing suggests a starting point for the line of reasoning he will pursue:

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid, §32, p. 69, original emphasis.

if some statements... are to express *noninferential* knowledge, they must have a credibility which is not a matter of being supported by other statements. Now there does seem to be a class of statements which fill at least part of this bill, namely such statements as would be said to *report observations*, thus, 'This is red.' These statements, candidly made, [would seem to] have authority. Yet they are not expressions of inference. How, then, is this authority to be understood?<sup>160</sup>

We have met the thought that some statements have non-inferential uses before, i.e., that some statements are reports (§4.1). But what is the connection between a report being non-inferentially *made* and its being *both* ultimate *and* authoritative, i.e., non-inferentially *justified*? And we should note a problem straight away with this line of reasoning. When we met the thought that some statements are reports it was also suggested that, because of this, they were not to be considered fact-stating. This was important: if reports are fact-stating, then Sellars cannot support the claim that it is the non-comparative use of the locution 'looks red' at work in appearance statements (again, §4.1). But then, if reports are not fact-stating, then they cannot be considered as putative instances of non-inferential knowledge: surely an instance of knowledge *is* fact-stating? On the face of it, then, Sellars would appear to be barking up the wrong tree in beginning his line of reasoning with reports. Nonetheless, let us persevere with his line of reasoning.

Now, Sellars qualifies the notion of a report that he will employ in an important manner: 'if the expression "following a rule" is taken seriously, and is not weakened beyond all recognition into the bare notion of exhibiting a uniformity—in which case the lightning, thunder sequence would "follow a rule"—then it is the knowledge or belief that the circumstances are of a certain kind, and not the mere fact that they *are* of this kind, which contributes to bringing about the action'.<sup>161</sup> The epistemic regress argument, as we have noted (§2.2), does not call into question *s*'s *understanding* of the propositions he believes, merely whether those beliefs can be justified and so amount to instances of knowledge. Indeed, none of the ancillary arguments adumbrated above have gone so far as to question whether *s* can understand the propositions he believes. However, in the one instance that we have considered *a definite semantics*, so to speak, viz. that picture of meaning and understanding which lay behind the logical atomism of the foundationalist, allusion was made to the notion of *rule-following* (§4.1).

Roughly speaking, the notion of rule-following is the idea that *s*'s understanding of a proposition is bound up with his ability to follow the rules for the use of its

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, §32, p. 70, original emphasis.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid, §33. pp. 72—73.

constituent concepts. To take that notion 'seriously', as Sellars urges, would appear to entail making room for two distinct possibilities: (a), that there is a standard of correctness which a putative instance of the following of a rule can be judged as correct or incorrect *against*; and (b), that *s* is *actually free* to abide by that standard of correctness or not. If provision for either of these possibilities is jettisoned, then that is *not* to take the notion of rule-following seriously.

Therefore, if, despite Sellars's analysis of looks-talk, we assume that a report is an action, then it cannot be that *s* understands a report *only* because it *really is* caused by that which its propositional content concerns. This is not to take the notion of rule-following seriously—it locates the meaning of the report's content outside the ambit of epistemic subjectivity, as something causal as opposed to intentional. To take that notion seriously, it can only be the case that *s* understands that the propositional content of a report *qua* action *will be* or *is likely to be* caused by that which it concerns that can act as a standard of correctness by which it can be judged as correct or incorrect, and in doing so make it possible to locate the meaning of that content inside the ambit of epistemic subjectivity. And notice that, if he understands that the propositional content of a report *qua* action *will be* or *is likely to be* caused by that which it concerns, then, given that for *s* to believe a proposition is for *s* to take it as true, in understanding that content he *should* believe it. But if a rule of action or 'ought to do' rule is to have such *normative force*, so to speak, then it can only be that *s* also knows or believes that rule itself.

Obviously all of this only matters if we assume a definite semantics which employs the notion of rule-following. However, whilst it is conceivable that Sellars proposed structure of knowledge could be reached independently of it, this assumption certainly provides a conducive context for its conception, so let us also assume such a definite semantics or, at least, as we shall not go into any robust characterisation of such a definite semantics, that *any* definite semantics *will* employ the notion of rule-following.

That being the case, we must note from the off an important epistemic corollary of the assumption that any definite semantics will employ the notion of rule-following. If it can only be that *s* knows or believes a rule of action if it is to have any normative force, then in the latter case it can really only be if he *justifiably* believes that rule that he can *understand that* it has such normative force—*mere* belief is too weak. And the obverse of this point is that *s* could surely justify an empirical belief of his by *showing* or *exhibiting* that he understands its propositional content. It would appear then, that on

the assumption that any definite semantics will employ the notion of rule-following, *s*'s understanding of the propositions he believes *could* be called into question in virtue of considerations *like* the epistemic regress argument. Indeed, the fact that the epistemic regress argument does *not* call *s*'s understanding of the empirical propositions he believes into question is a hint towards its eventual dissolution.

Nonetheless, as has already been noted, given his analysis of looks-talk Sellars obviously does not take a report to be an action. Indeed, he embarks upon the positive specification of his position as follows:

We might begin by trying something like the following: An overt or covert token of "This is green" in the presence of a green item is a [report]... and expresses observational knowledge if and only if it is a manifestation of a tendency to produce overt or covert tokens of "This is green"—given a certain set—if and only if a green object is being looked at in standard conditions. Clearly on this interpretation the occurrence of such tokens of "This is green" would be "following a rule" only in the sense that they are instances of a uniformity, a uniformity differing from the lightning-thunder case in that it is an acquired causal characteristic of the language user. Clearly the above suggestion, which corresponds to the "thermometer view" criticized by Professor Price, and which we have already rejected, won't do as it stands. Let us see, however, if it can't be revised to fit the criteria I have been using for "expressing observational knowledge."<sup>162</sup>

Let us call this Sellars's 'first-run' position. He is clearly concerned with how an 'overt or covert token of "This is green"' can, firstly, be taken to be a report, and, secondly, how that report can express 'observational knowledge'—knowledge of a particular matter of fact, in this case that a particular (physical) object is green. The idea Sellars formulates here is a causal one. To paraphrase: a token of 'This is green' which occurs in the presence of a green object will be *both* a report *and also* express observational knowledge iff: (a), it is causally elicited from *s*, who has a general propensity to differentially produce tokens of 'This is green'—from a limited set of minimal, 'colour' tokens, e.g., 'This is red', 'This is blue', etc.—in response to green objects; and (b), in this instance it has been elicited by a green object in standard conditions of perception. The satisfaction of (a) is meant to ensure that a *putative* tokening of 'This is green' *is* a tokening of 'This is green', such that it *is* a report and so *could* express observational knowledge, whilst the satisfaction of (b) is meant to ensure that that tokening of 'This is green' *qua* report *does* express observational knowledge.

Of course, as we have seen, Sellars's first-run position is objectionable by his own account: if a report is causally elicited, and that is *all* that is required for its

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid, §35, pp. 73—74.



propositional content to be meaningful, then its meaning is located outside the ambit of epistemic subjectivity. (We might also criticise it for *purely epistemic reasons*, so to speak: it is clearly a very simple variant of foundationalism.) Nonetheless, this is the picture Sellars will attempt to revise ‘to fit the criteria I have been using for “expressing observational knowledge”’, i.e., the criteria of ultimacy and authority.

### §6.3. Sellars’s Two Hurdles

In regards to the goal of revising his first-run position to fit his two criteria, Sellars writes:

The first hurdle to be jumped concerns the *authority* which, as I have emphasized, a sentence token must have in order that it may be used to express knowledge. Clearly, on this account the only thing that can remotely be supposed to constitute such authority is the fact that one can infer the presence of a green object from the fact that someone makes this report. [Moreover]..., the correctness of a report does not have to be construed as the rightness of an *action*. A report can be correct as being an instance of a general mode of behaviour which, in a given linguistic community, it is reasonable to sanction and support.

The second hurdle is, however, the decisive one. For we have seen that to be the expression of knowledge, a report must not only *have* authority, this authority must *in some sense* be recognized by the person whose report it is. And this is a steep hurdle indeed. For if the authority of the report “This is green” lies in the fact that the existence of green items appropriately related to the perceiver can be inferred from the occurrence of such reports, it follows that only someone who is able to draw this inference, and therefore who has not only the concept *green*, but also the concept of uttering “This is green”—indeed, the concept of certain conditions of perception, those which could correctly be called ‘standard conditions’—could be in a position to token “This is green” in recognition of its authority. In other words, for a [report of]... “This is green” to “express observational knowledge,” not only must it be a *symptom* or *sign* of the presence of a green object in standard conditions, but the perceiver must know that tokens of “This is green” *are* symptoms of the presence of green objects in conditions which are standard for visual perception.<sup>163</sup>

Now, the first thing to notice in regards to Sellars’s two hurdles is the following point: nowhere in those hurdles does Sellars jettison the two conditions the satisfaction of which he postulates in his first-run position as being both necessary and sufficient for a token of ‘This is green’ to amount to an instance of observational knowledge. That is, his criticism of that position must only concern the sufficiency of those conditions. Therefore, when he talks of ‘this report’ or ‘a report’ in those hurdles it must be

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid, §35, pp. 74—75, original emphasis.

understood, firstly, as a sentence token causally elicited from *s*, who has a general propensity to differentially produce tokens of 'This is green' in response to green objects, such that it is a report, and, secondly, that in this instance it has actually been elicited by a green object in standard conditions of perception. With this in mind we will approach each of those hurdles in turn.

(a) *Sellars's first hurdle*. Here Sellars introduces an idea that swiftly takes him beyond his first-run position and, indeed, lays to rest any fears we might have that he is treating reports as fact-stating. Nonetheless, the two distinct—but related—points he is making in this hurdle in regards to the authority of 'a sentence token' doubly provide, going forward, an issue for Sellars's to tackle in regards to his proposed structure of knowledge, an issue he will *not* have tackled satisfactorily by the end of Part VIII of *EPM*.

In the first instance, then, we need to unpack Sellars's claim that 'the only thing that can remotely be supposed to constitute such authority is the fact one can infer the presence of a green object from the fact that someone makes this report'. And the first thing to note in unpacking this claim is that, *if* it is the fact that one can infer the presence of a green object from a report of 'This is green' which constitutes the authority of a sentence token, *then* it is *not* the report whose authority is so constituted. It will be *the conclusion of the inference qua* sentence token whose authority is constituted by the fact that one can infer the presence of a green object from the fact that someone makes the report 'This is green'. That is, the conclusion of the inference will be authoritative because, presumably, that inference *is* successful.

Now, if it is not a report of 'This is green' whose authority is constituted by the fact that one can infer the presence of a green object from the fact that one makes that report, then that report *cannot* be an instance of observational knowledge. Therefore, as Sellars's analysis of looks-talk requires, it cannot be that that report is fact-stating, thus alleviating our fears that Sellars is barking up the wrong tree in beginning his line of reasoning with reports. In parallel, note that the conclusion of the inference appears to replicate the propositional content of the report: the content of the report *already* says that there is a green object present. That is, the conclusion of the inference will *also* have the propositional content 'This is green'. This is indicative of the fact that there are *no other* premises involved in the inference to that conclusion over and above the report. And this helps explain *why* Sellars takes it that the authority of a sentence token *can* be constituted by the fact that one can infer the presence of a green object from the

fact that someone makes the report 'This is green'. For if that report is not an instance of observational knowledge, then the conclusion of the inference, whilst being inferred from another cognitive state (the report), will *not* be inferred from any other instances of knowledge, observational or otherwise.<sup>164</sup> The conclusion of the inference will therefore satisfy the criterion of ultimacy. If a sentence token is to amount to an instance of non-inferential knowledge, then ultimacy and authority must come together.

Nonetheless, this does not explain *how* Sellars takes it that the authority of a sentence token can be constituted by the fact that one can infer the presence of a green object from the fact that someone makes the report 'This is green', i.e., how he thinks that inference works. And the problem is *not* whether that inference will be successful, and so its conclusion authoritative, for we are assuming that, in this instance, the report is causally elicited from *s* by a green object in standard conditions of perception—the inference *must* be successful. The problem is how *s* can understand that he *should* make that inference, i.e., how *s* can understand that it will be or is likely to be successful, given *only* the report. And we must be clear concerning what is at stake here: not only is it the case that such an inference ensures that its authoritative conclusion will also be ultimate, it is in fact the *only* conceivable manner in which an instance of observational knowledge *could* be both ultimate and authoritative, i.e., non-inferentially justified. For, firstly, clearly if reference to an epistemic principle was required for *s* to understand that he should make that inference, then its conclusion could not be ultimate *because that principle would have to be justified*, and, secondly, a report could *never* be an instance of non-inferentially justified observational knowledge.

To see why this latter is the case we must ask the following question: if *s cannot* understand that he should make an inference to the presence of a green object given only a report of 'This is green', then how can he know that something is green, and specifically if such knowledge is premised upon the satisfaction of both the criteria of ultimacy and authority? Since we are trying to explain the possibility of observational knowledge, the only other option would be if the report itself was both ultimate and authoritative. Of course this undermines Sellars's analysis of looks-talk, in that we are taking the report to be fact-stating, but the question now is rather: can that report *in fact* be both ultimate and authoritative? And clearly it *cannot*: in such a situation the

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<sup>164</sup> This, then, is the point at which Sellars would seem to build in a possible response to Gettier-type counter examples to the tripartite definition of knowledge as justified true belief. Even though it is non-inferentially justified, there is nonetheless a premise that the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object is inferred from, i.e., the report. The point being that, if the report it is inferred from is false, then, of course, the conclusion of the inference *cannot* be an instance of knowledge, whether it is non-inferentially justified or not (in a sense to be specified).

satisfaction of either the criterion of ultimacy or the criterion of authority *precludes* the satisfaction of the other. The point being that, to be ultimate, a report cannot be inferred from any other instances of empirical knowledge, observational or otherwise, yet to be authoritative, *it must be recognisable as such*, and, in terms of a report, these requirements necessarily clash.

A report of 'This is green' would presumably be ultimate because it was in fact causally elicited from *s* by a green object in standard conditions of perception, but it could not be authoritative in virtue of this fact, because it could not be recognised as being authoritative in virtue of this fact *alone*. To recognise it as being authoritative in virtue of the fact that the report was causally elicited from *s* by a green object in standard conditions of perception would require that *s independently* knew that it *was* elicited by that green object and that the conditions of perception *were* standard, i.e., if *s* had other instances of observational knowledge pertaining to the objective context at hand. Therefore the recognition of the report's authority could only be accomplished inferentially, thus giving the lie to its ultimacy: *s* would have to infer from those other instances of observational knowledge to the authority of the report, i.e., in this case the truth of its propositional content, but then it would in fact be inferentially justified by other instances of observational knowledge.

And yet, if the report was considered recognisably authoritative in virtue of something else, e.g., that it was in fact a report of *s's*, who has a general propensity to differentially produce tokens of 'This is green' in response to green objects, then it could not be considered ultimate in virtue of this fact, because it could not be considered an instance of observational knowledge in virtue of this fact. To be an instance of observational knowledge, of course, it is not enough that a report just is a report, its propositional content must also be true—that report must in fact be causally elicited from *s* by a green object in standard conditions of perception.

Finally, a report could not be considered ultimate because it was in fact causally elicited from *s* by a green object in standard conditions of perception, as it must have been to be considered ultimate, *even if* it was considered recognisably authoritative, not in virtue of that fact, but because of the fact that it was a report of *s's*, who has a general propensity to differentially produce tokens of 'This is green' in response to green objects. To be recognised as authoritative in virtue of the fact that it was a report of *s's*, who has a general propensity to differentially produce tokens of 'This is green' in response to green objects, would require that *s independently* knew that it *was* a report, i.e., if *s* had other instances of observational knowledge pertaining to the subjective

context at hand. Therefore the recognition of the report's authority could again only be accomplished inferentially, thus again giving the lie to its ultimacy: *s* would have to infer from that instance of observational knowledge to the authority of the report, i.e., in this case because it has a certain epistemic property, namely the property of being a report, but then again it would in fact be inferentially justified by another instance of observational knowledge.

The fundamental moral of these considerations is that, by elimination, the only conceivable manner in which an instance of observational knowledge could be both ultimate and authoritative, i.e., non-inferentially justified, is if it is the case that it *is* the conclusion of an inference to the presence of a green object given only a report of 'This is green'. Therefore, it is of great importance that Sellars explains how *s* can understand that he should make that inference.

In the second instance, then, Sellars remarks that 'the correctness of a report does not have to be construed as the rightness of an *action*'. Instead it 'can be correct as being an instance of a general mode of behaviour which, in a given linguistic community, it is reasonable to sanction and support'. Clearly this remark also requires some unpacking. What Sellars is obliquely gesturing at here is the idea that a report is something *more* than causally elicited, but something *less* than an action. That is, Sellars is attempting to navigate between the two horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, if Sellars says that a report just is causally elicited, i.e., not subject to a standard of correctness, then its meaning is located outside the ambit of epistemic subjectivity—that was Sellars's criticism of his first-run position. In such a case he would not be taking the notion of rule-following seriously. On the other hand, if Sellars says that a report is an action, i.e., subject to a rule of action, which dictates that *s* must also know or believe that rule of action if it is to have any normative force, and has referred to it in making the report, then *the least* that this implies is that the report itself would be the result of an inference, i.e., fact-stating, and this would entail that there could *never* be an instance of non-inferentially justified observational knowledge, in the simple sense that the rule which it was in some way inferred from would have to be justifiably believed by *s*.<sup>165</sup>

Sellars's way out of this dilemma is to suggest that, even though a report of 'This is green' cannot be held to a standard of correctness *qua* rule of action, its meaning can nonetheless be located within the ambit of epistemic subjectivity because it can be held to an *intersubjective* standard of correctness. That is, the suggestion

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<sup>165</sup> It also implies, amongst other things, that the elicitation of the report is severed from that which its propositional content concerns, i.e., that it is intentionally as opposed to causally elicited, which is possibly unintelligible (see §2.3).

appears to be that, instead of *s* having to *internalise* the standard of correctness applicable to the propositional content of a report of 'This is green', such that that standard is something else in *s*'s epistemic economy which must *also* be taken into account when he is considering whether that report is meaningful or not, it can be *external* to that economy, yet internal to the cognitive economies of *others within his linguistic community*, and the report still meaningful for *s*.

Nonetheless, whilst all this *may* ensure that a report of 'This is green' is meaningful for *s*, such that the inference to the presence of a green object is so much as possible, it simply does not explain how *s* can understand that he should make that inference given only the report. Therefore, at the end of Sellars's first hurdle the outstanding issue for Sellars to deal with in regards to his proposed structure of empirical knowledge is to *not only* expand upon what is really *a bare appeal* to the idea of an intersubjective standard of correctness, i.e., to at least indicate what kind of 'ought' can be ascribed to the correctness of a report, *but also* explain how the 'general mode of behaviour' licensed by that standard enables *s* to understand that he should infer the presence of a green object given only a report of 'This is green'.

(b) *Sellars's second hurdle.* Our consideration of Sellars's second hurdle will necessarily be briefer than our consideration of his first; we are fast approaching the juncture at which the epistemic regress argument arises *vis-à-vis* Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge. His second hurdle takes up the issue of how *s* can recognise that the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object, given only a report of 'This is green', is authoritative.

If the only conceivable manner in which an instance of observational knowledge could be both ultimate and authoritative, i.e., non-inferentially justified, is if it is the case that it is the conclusion of an inference to the presence of a green object given only a report of 'This is green', then, as Sellars points out, 'it follows that only someone who is able to draw this inference, and therefore who has not only the concept *green*, but also the concept of uttering "This is green"—indeed, the concept of certain conditions of perception, those which could correctly be called 'standard conditions'—could be in a position to token "This is green" in recognition of its authority'. This comment also requires some unpacking.

The basic idea here is one which we have met before: for something to be authoritative, it must be recognisable as such. Now, we have also seen that, if the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object is to be possibly recognised

as authoritative, then that recognition cannot come via the fact that its propositional content is true, or that it has a certain epistemic property, else its ultimacy will be undermined. This is another moral of our considerations to the effect that a report cannot be an instance of observational knowledge. However, there is an element to the conclusion of the inference which a report does not share, i.e., that it *is* the conclusion of an inference. Can this aid in the recognition of its authority without impugning its ultimacy?

Yes. This is because, just as the conclusion of the inference will be true or false depending upon whether the report it is inferred from is true or false, i.e., if it is or is not causally elicited by a green object in standard conditions of perception, so will *the making of* the inference from that report be correct or incorrect in virtue of whether the report it is an inference from is true or false; the truth or falsity of the conclusion of the inference will *co-vary* with the correctness or incorrectness of the making of the inference. In other words, whilst it is not properly a part of the conclusion of the inference, the making of the inference can nonetheless be indicative of the former's authority. Moreover, given that a conclusion *has been* reached, then it must be the case that an inference *has been* made. Therefore, since a report is not fact-stating, there will be no need for *s* to have independent (subjective) observational knowledge that the inference has actually been made: if he is asked, or asks himself, how he knows that something is green, then that which the question is being asked in regards to *must* be the conclusion of the inference. That is, the recognition of the making of the inference as indicative of the authority of its conclusion does not involve *s* having to independently know by observation that it has obtained.

However, *s* must be able to *defend* his making of the inference, for, given that the correctness or incorrectness of the making of the inference co-varies with the truth or falsity of its conclusion, in defending his making of the inference he recognises the authority of its conclusion. Therefore, whilst it *cannot* be that he refers to such *general* knowledge in making the inference to the presence of a green object—again, that *must* occur given *only* the report of 'This is green', else the conclusion of the inference is *not* ultimate—*s* will nonetheless have to know that he should make that inference because he knows that such reports '*are* symptoms of the presence of green objects in conditions which are standard for visual perception'. And we must be absolutely clear what is being proposed here: in defending his making of the inference, *s* is *not* inferentially recognising the authority of its conclusion. He is instead moving onto a *distinct justificatory track* which is not, in an epistemically significant sense it is hoped,

inferentially connected to the conclusion of the inference. Only in such a way could *s* be in a position to token—infer—‘This is green’ in recognition of its authority, and without impugning its ultimacy. As Sellars writes in *summa* of his second hurdle: ‘the point is specifically that observational knowledge of any particular fact, e.g. that this is green, presupposes that one know general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*’.<sup>166</sup>

Notice what Sellars is proposing here: he is proposing that a belief can be justified not—or not only, perhaps—in virtue of the fact that its propositional content is true, or in virtue of the fact that it has some epistemic property, but in virtue of *the epistemic conduct* of its believer, *s*. This is the non-traditional understanding of what it is for a belief to be justified I have mentioned on various occasions above (again, see the introduction and §2.2), and the preceding is a rough approximation of *one side* of that non-traditional understanding.

Nonetheless, we are reaching the juncture at which the epistemic regress argument arises *vis-à-vis* Sellars’s proposed structure of knowledge. For as Sellars is quick to point out, if ‘observational knowledge of any particular fact, e.g. that this is green, presupposes that one knows general facts of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*’, then there is ‘an obvious regress in the view that we are examining’. He continues: ‘Does it not tell us that observational knowledge as time *t* presupposes knowledge of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, which presupposes *prior* observational knowledge, which presupposes *other* knowledge of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*, which proposes still other, and *prior*, observational knowledge, and so on?’ But if there is a regress here it has *multiple aspects*, and only one of those aspects is to be associated with the epistemic regress argument.

The problem in general is the following: if the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object given only a report of ‘This is green’ *really is* both ultimate and authoritative, i.e., non-inferentially justified, then it can only be the case that the knowledge of a general truth that *s* is required to have to be in a position to token ‘This is green’ in recognition of its authority, and without impugning its ultimacy, *must also* be both ultimate and authoritative, i.e., *must also* be non-inferentially justified. That is, *s* must also know the general truth that ‘*X is a reliable symptom of Y*’ or, roughly speaking, that ‘Reports of ‘This is green’ are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects’ in virtue of the fact that it is both ultimate and authoritative, i.e., non-inferentially justified. Given this requirement, we can understand the aspects of the regress Sellars articulates to resolve themselves around the distinct demands that *s*’s

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid, §36, p. 75, original emphasis.



belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' be *both* ultimate *and* authoritative.

#### §6.4. Sellars and the Epistemic Regress Argument

Something cannot be ultimate unless it is authoritative, however it may be authoritative although it is not ultimate. This is indicative, however, of *the epistemic primacy* of its ultimacy. That is, something's ultimacy is the source of its authority—it will be authoritative, so long as it can be recognised as such, in virtue of its being ultimate. For the question, of course, is how anything could be authoritative to begin with, and whilst something must be able to have authority in virtue of something else having authority, that just defers the question of how anything could have authority. What makes something ultimate, on the other hand, is not only that it is not inferred from any other instances of knowledge, observational or otherwise, but also that its propositional content is true in virtue of the fact to which it refers actually obtaining, and it has been *in some sense* causally elicited by that fact. (This is really the third moral to be drawn from our considerations to the effect that a report cannot be an instance of observational knowledge.) And that is why something's ultimacy is the source of its authority—it is true in virtue of its being ultimate. Therefore, if an instance of empirical knowledge is *possibly* ultimate it is *possibly* authoritative. (Of course, if the recognition of its authority must be inferential and so necessarily undermines its authority, then it cannot be that it *was* ultimate to begin with.) Thus, one question we can ask in regards to *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' is whether it is possibly ultimate?

If we assume that *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' *cannot* be ultimate, then this has the following implication. As we have seen, the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object can only be authoritative if it can be recognised as such. Now, if *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' cannot be ultimate, then it cannot be authoritative, and, if it cannot be authoritative, then *s* cannot recognise the conclusion of the inference as authoritative. But, if *s* cannot recognise the conclusion of the inference as authoritative, then it cannot be authoritative, whether or not it is possibly ultimate. That is, if *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' cannot be ultimate, then *neither* that *nor* the conclusion of the inference can be authoritative.

The resultant of these considerations is the following *diachronic* regress of *conditional* justification, which is both the first aspect of the regress Sellars articulates, as well as the manner in which the epistemic regress argument arises *vis-à-vis* Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge. Firstly, if *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' cannot be ultimate, then, given that we are assuming that the possibility of *unconditional* justification is predicated upon the possibility of non-inferential knowledge, that we are assuming that the possibility of non-inferential knowledge is predicated upon the satisfaction of both the criteria of ultimacy and authority, and that the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object cannot be authoritative if *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' cannot be ultimate, then unconditional justification is impossible because neither can be both ultimate and authoritative.

Secondly, given that the propositional contents of both *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' and the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object are *reciprocally referential*, so to speak, then he also understands that it can *only* be the case that they justify each other. That is, if *s* understands that reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects, then he understands that some things *can be* green, and, if he understands that some things *are* green, then he understands that he should believe that reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects. And whilst this is not in fact a *strict* referential reciprocity, in that to understand that reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects *s* must actually understand *both* that some things are green *and also* that, more often than not, he *is* a reliable reporter of green things, *semantic precedence* would appear to be taken by the former because presumably *s* could not understand that he is a reliable reporter of green things unless he *already* understands that some things are green.

So, thirdly, to be justified in believing the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object *s* must *already* know the general truth that reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects in standard conditions of perception, but to be justified in believing that general truth he must have *still prior* observational knowledge that some things are green, etc.

But why should we associate this diachronic regress of conditional justification with the epistemic regress argument? This is because it is the most basic regress which can accrue to Sellars's proposed structure of empirical knowledge—any other regresses

which accrue to that structure presuppose that an answer has been found to *this* regress. That is, issues concerning the recognition of something's authority do not occur unless it can *actually be* possibly authoritative, and it can only be possibly authoritative if it can be possibly ultimate, or if it is possibly authoritative in virtue of something else being possibly authoritative because it is possibly ultimate.

Now, every answer to the epistemic regress argument comes with a *structural dimension*, and Sellars's answer is no different. We have already seen that any kind of appeal to non-inferential justification will necessarily involve two strata of knowledge. We have also seen that, in demanding that an instance of non-inferential knowledge satisfy both the criteria of ultimacy and authority, Sellars is committed to 'a privileged stratum of knowledge' which is constituted by *both* observational knowledge *and* knowledge of general truths. As Sellars writes:

all that the view I am defending requires is that no tokening by S *now* of "This is green" is to count as "expressing observational knowledge" unless it is also correct to say of S that he *now* knows the appropriate fact of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*.... And while the correctness of this statement about Jones requires that Jones could *now* cite prior particular facts as evidence for the idea that these utterances *are* reliable indicators, it requires only that it is correct to say that Jones *now* knows, thus remembers, that these particular facts *did* obtain. It does not require that it be correct to say that at the time these facts did obtain he *then knew* them to obtain. And the regress disappears.<sup>167</sup>

A variety of things are being said in this passage. Let us focus to begin with on Sellars's claim that 'all that the view I am defending requires is that no tokening by S *now* of "This is green" is to count as "expressing observational knowledge" unless it is also correct to say of S that he *now* knows the appropriate fact of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*', which is most pertinent to our present structural considerations. The point, of course, is that, if both the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object and s's belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' are non-inferentially justified, then they are *not* inferentially connected to each other, whilst each nonetheless presupposes the authority of the other. This claim of Sellars's simply makes this explicit, and in doing so allows us to draw some further conclusions.

In making that claim Sellars is making an appeal to the notion of *simultaneity of belief*. In doing so he attacks the notion of inference at the heart of the epistemic regress argument. The notion of inference is a diachronic notion, but that of simultaneity of

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid, §37, pp. 76—77, original emphasis.

belief *synchronic*. If *s* can believe both the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object and the proposition that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' simultaneously, as a consequence of their both being possibly ultimate, and because they are both possibly ultimate they are possibly authoritative, then, the thought goes, whilst the recognition of the authority of either presupposes *the authority* of the other, so long as the recognition of the authority of either does not presuppose *the recognition of the authority* of the other, which would be circular, thus impugning their ultimacy, they are in fact justified merely by their presence in *s*'s epistemic economy. If this is possible, then it is just not the case that the only way in which a belief can justify another belief is inferentially.

And yet, remaining with structural considerations, already we might intuit a problem for Sellars's proposed structure of empirical knowledge. This stems from the eliminatory conclusion of Sellars's two hurdles that the only way in which the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object can be considered both ultimate and authoritative is *iff s* can defend the inference to that conclusion, and so recognise its authority, for which it is required that he knows the general truth that reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects. But whilst this may safeguard the ultimacy of the conclusion of the inference, in that in defending his making of the inference *s* is moving onto a distinct justificatory track, it would nonetheless appear to presuppose the recognition of the authority of his belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects'. That is, for the conclusion of the inference to be recognised as authoritative, it is not enough that in defending his making of the inference *s* just asserts that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects', we must further ask how *s*'s belief in that proposition is justified for him, i.e., how he can recognise that belief as authoritative, and this would appear to entail that the recognition of the authority of the conclusion of the inference presupposes the recognition of the authority of *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects'.

But this requirement is not necessarily a problem. Note that, so long as the recognition of the authority of *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects', in this specific context, i.e., the defence of *s*'s making of the inference to the presence of a green object, does *not* presuppose the authority of the conclusion of the inference, then we can say that the recognition of the authority of the conclusion of the inference does not presuppose the recognition of the

authority of the former. The point being that, in a different context, i.e., one *without* any reference to the conclusion of the inference, it *must still* be possible to recognise *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' as authoritative. This is because, if the recognition of the authority of *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' does *not* presuppose the authority of the conclusion of the inference, then it *cannot* be that reference to that conclusion is required for the former to be recognised as authoritative.

That being the case, then all the recognition of the authority of the conclusion of the inference *really* presupposes is the authority of *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects'—it does *not* presuppose the recognition of the latter's authority. In recognising the latter as authoritative in the defence of his making of the inference *s* is only *going through the motions*, so to speak. And this is a structural requirement: in general, the recognition of the authority of *s*'s non-inferential observational knowledge *cannot* presuppose the authority of his non-inferential knowledge of general truths *in the same way* that the recognition of the authority of the latter presupposes the authority of the former.

Over and above structural considerations, however, Sellars's appeal to the notion of simultaneity of belief has implications for the possible ultimacy of *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects'. And here the point is that, in virtue of that appeal, whatever *s* has inferred the propositional content of that belief from—and given that it is a *general* content, it is flatly objectionable to say that it has not been inferred from something—it will *not* have been inferred from any *prior* instances of knowledge, observational or otherwise. This is because, as we have seen, whilst he cannot *understand* the propositional content 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' *unless* he understands that some things *are* green, he cannot *know* that something is green *unless* he can recognise the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object as authoritative, for which it is required that *s* also know the general truth that reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects.

So, given that we are assuming that *s* *does* have a general propensity to differentially produce tokens of 'This is green' in response to green objects, we can say that *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' will be possibly ultimate: it will not be inferred from any other instances of knowledge, observational or otherwise, and its propositional content will be true in

virtue of the fact to which it refers actually obtaining, because in some sense it has been causally elicited by that fact. We shall take it, then, that in virtue of his appeal to the notion of simultaneity of belief, and whatever underlies that appeal, Sellars has an answer to the epistemic regress argument.

Note, however, that Sellars does not say that the regress he articulates ‘disappears’ straight after making the appeal to simultaneity of belief. For he needs to illustrate how the required recognition of the authority of *s*’s belief that ‘Reports of ‘This is green’ are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects’ does not presuppose the authority of the conclusion of the inference. Indeed, if the recognition of the authority of *s*’s belief that ‘Reports of ‘This is green’ are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects’ presupposes the authority of the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object, then that conclusion cannot be authoritative because it cannot be recognised as authoritative without impugning its ultimacy.

The resultant would be the same diachronic regress of conditional justification we have already met, yet this time engendered by the fact that the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object cannot be authoritative, because it cannot be recognised as authoritative without impugning its ultimacy, as opposed to the impossibility of *s*’s belief that ‘Reports of ‘This is green’ are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects’ being possibly ultimate. Indeed, given that it would concern, effectively, the recognition of the conclusion of the inference’s ultimacy, since that it is the source of its authority, i.e., the recognition of the fact that a putative instance of observational knowledge exemplifies a certain epistemic property, namely the property of being ultimate, in virtue of which it is acceptable as justified, we should understand this aspect of the regress Sellars articulates as the manner in which Bonjour’s argument arises *vis-à-vis* the former’s proposed structure of empirical knowledge.

But Sellars is alive to this problem, which is why he does not say that the regress he articulates disappears after making the appeal to simultaneity of belief. Instead he says that that regress disappears only after making the further claim that ‘while the correctness of this statement about Jones’—i.e., the statement ‘that no tokening by *S* now of “This is green” is to count as “expressing observational knowledge” unless it is also correct to say of *S* that he now knows the appropriate fact of the form *X is a reliable symptom of Y*—‘requires that Jones could now cite prior particular facts as evidence for the idea that these utterances are reliable indicators, it requires only that it is correct to say that Jones now knows, thus remembers, that these particular facts did obtain’.

The idea here is that the recognition of the authority of *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' is to be accomplished by *s* citing as evidence for its authority the *prior* cognitive states he inferred that belief from, the particular matters of fact referred to by the propositional contents of which he *now* knows, thus remembers, to have obtained, i.e., which he has now recognised as authoritative. So, the thought continues, since *s* did not have to know that those prior cognitive states *were* instances of observational knowledge *when* he inferred the general truth that reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects from them, then this should not impugn the ultimacy of his belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects', and, in parallel, since the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object is *not* one of those states, then this should not presuppose its authority and thus impugn its ultimacy.

What Sellars is attempting here is to characterise how *s* can defend his inference to the general fact that reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects. And clearly something like this is required, in that, again, the recognition of the authority of *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' cannot come via the fact that its propositional content is true, or that it has a certain epistemic property. Nonetheless, that attempted defence fails. Sellars is saying that, *in virtue of the fact that s* has now recognised the authority of the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object, *because* he has now recognised the authority of his belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects', *because* he has now recognised the authority of the prior cognitive states he inferred that belief from, *then* he has now recognised those prior cognitive states as authoritative, which is flatly circular, thus undermining the ultimacy of both the conclusion of the inference and *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects'.

What has gone wrong? The problem is, for *s* to recognise his belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' as authoritative via a defence of the inference by which he comes to believe that proposition is for *s* to recognise it as authoritative via the fact that its propositional content is true. That is why it presupposes the authority of the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object: he must have observational knowledge pertaining to the objective context at hand, i.e., in this case that something *can in fact* be green, if he is to recognise the particular matters of fact referred to by the propositional

contents of the prior cognitive states as having obtained, i.e., if he is to have recognised those states as authoritative. Thus the circle.

The conclusion we should draw is that, if, as Sellars's two hurdles dictate, the *only* way in which the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object can be considered both ultimate and authoritative is iff *s* can defend the inference to that conclusion, then it *cannot* be the case, in parallel, that his belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' can be recognised as authoritative in the same manner. In other words, as we have already seen, the recognition of the authority of *s*'s non-inferential observational knowledge cannot presuppose the authority of his non-inferential knowledge of general truths in the same way that the recognition of the authority of the latter presupposes the authority of the former. What is missing here is *the other side* of the non-traditional understanding of what it is for a belief to be justified. But we will not find its characterisation in Part VIII of *EPM*. Indeed, as set out there Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge is fatally flawed. But note that he has left us with a possible line of investigation. Let us recoup and return to the question of how *s* understands that he should make the inference to the presence of a green object given only a report of 'This is green'. In other words, what kind of 'ought' does Sellars ascribe to the correctness of a report, and how does the general mode of behaviour licensed by the intersubjective standard of correctness applicable to reports of 'This is green' enable *s* to understand that he should make that inference?

#### §6.5. Another Kind of 'Ought'

A report is to be understood along the lines of a candid thinking-out-loud, i.e., for Sellars, the most basic of mentalistic concepts. It is not a deliberative linguistic action but nonetheless a linguistic *act*. As Sellars writes:

Now to say that [a]... thinking-out-loud that something is the case is epistemically *justified* or *reasonable* or has authority is clearly *not* to say that Jones has correctly inferred from certain premises, which he has good reason to believe, that there is a red apple in front of him[, for example]. For we are dealing with a paradigm case of non-inferential belief. *The authority of the thinking accrues to it in quite a different way. It can be traced to the fact that Jones has learned how to use the relevant words in perceptual situations.*<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Sellars, 'The Structure of Knowledge', II, §37, p. 324, original emphasis.



And whilst Sellars is rather infelicitous here, in that he does *not* in fact take reports *qua* candid thinkings-out-loud to be instances of observational knowledge, the idea we must trace is the final one, relativised to the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object: authority accrues to the conclusion of the inference in virtue of the fact that the report it is inferred from is causally elicited from *s* by a green object in standard conditions of perception, *and because s 'has learned how to use the relevant words in perceptual situations'*—this is why he has a general propensity to differentially produce tokens of 'This is green' in response to green objects. That is, we must explain the impact of the fact that *s* has learned how to use the relevant words in perceptual situations upon the possible ultimacy of the conclusion of the inference.

Simply put, reports, being made in perceptual situations, are subject to *rules of behaviour* or what Sellars calls 'ought to be' rules, i.e., intersubjective standards of correctness which, *because* they are intersubjective, cannot apply to actions.<sup>169</sup> They can only ensure that something is correct or incorrect in virtue of how things *should be*, given the perceptual situation. *S* should report that 'This is green' in regards to a green object in standard conditions of perception, but he doesn't understand that he should report that 'This is green' in making that report, it is others within his linguistic community who understand that he should make that report, because they know that it has in fact been causally elicited from him by a green object in such conditions. Indeed, it is others within his linguistic community who have inculcated *s* to make that report in response to green objects in standard conditions of perception. And this is the key to our understanding how *s* can understand that he should make the inference to the presence of a green object given only a report of 'This is green': *in fact he can't, at least not yet.*

To be more perspicuous: a rule of behaviour works in *an exclusionary manner*, so to speak. *S* is following a rule of behaviour if he differentially responds to all and only green objects in standard conditions of perception with reports of 'This is green'. But this has nothing to do with whether *s* understands that he should respond to all and only green objects in such conditions with reports of 'This is green'; it is *brute behavioural conditioning*, so to speak. And it is because of such brute behavioural conditioning that *s* makes the inference to the presence of a green object given only a report of 'This is green'. In virtue of that conditioning, if everything has gone correctly, i.e., the report has in fact been causally elicited from *s* by a green object in standard conditions of perception, and *s* has learned how to use the relevant words in perceptual

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<sup>169</sup> Cf. Wilfrid Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes*, (Atascadero: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1992), pp. 75—77.

situations (*s*'s reports of 'This is green' are actually subject to a rule of behaviour), then *all* that *s* can infer from a report of 'This is green' *is* the presence of a green object, because *all* that is present in his epistemic economy *is* the report. There is nothing else for him to infer. But, of course, the behaviour of *s qua* inference is intelligible because others within his linguistic community understand that the report it was based upon was actually causally elicited from *s* by a green object in standard conditions of perception, such that it is understood by at least someone that *s* should have made that inference if he had in fact had the choice.

We can now understand what Sellars is really attempting in situating his proposed structure of empirical knowledge within the context of the assumption that any definite semantics will employ the notion of rule-following. It is the characterisation, suitably idealised, of *how s* can become aware of his own epistemic subjectivity, i.e., of how *s* can move from behaviour to action—from consciousness to self-consciousness, perhaps. In recognising the authority of the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object *s* comes to understand that he should have made that inference, even though he had no choice. That is, *s* comes to recognise what *would* be the rule of action for a report of 'This is green' *if* that report *were* an action. And this has very important implications. If, as it transpires, the inference to the presence of a green object is *not* something *s* understands that he should make, then it *cannot* be that what he should infer from the prior cognitive states is the fact that reports of 'This is green' *are* reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects. Indeed, it *cannot* be that what *is* inferable from those prior cognitive states is that fact.

We have seen that, for *s* to understand that reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects, he must understand both that some things are green and also that, more often than not, he is a reliable reporter of green things. It was also suggested that the former would appear to have semantic precedence over the latter, in that presumably *s* could not understand that he *is* a reliable reporter of green things unless he already understands that some things *are* green. But, in fact, *s* cannot understand that some things are green unless he can recognise the conclusions of inferences to the presence of green objects as authoritative. Such understanding is what goes with the fact that *s* does *not* understand that he should infer the presence of a green object given only a report of 'This is green', i.e., that he *just* believes that conclusion.

And yet, although *s* does not understand that he should believe that something is green given only a report of 'This is green', we should allow that, in coming to believe that proposition, he can nonetheless *do things with it*. Indeed, we should allow that he

can do *everything* with that proposition that a *fully reflective* epistemic subject can, *except* those things which require that he *has* recognised that he should believe it. In other words, what *s* can infer from the prior cognitive states is instead the *conditional* general truth that some things *might* be green, and, *if* some things are green, *then* he will be a reliable reporter of green things.<sup>170</sup> Therefore, the propositional content of the belief via which *s* is to recognise the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object as authoritative cannot be 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects', but must instead be 'I am a reliable reporter of green things'. And now we face a decisive break with Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge as set out in Part VIII of *EPM*, and specifically in regards to the manner in which *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things' is to be recognised as authoritative: the propositional content of that belief is *an assumption to be proved*, as opposed to the conclusion of an inference to be defended.

To be clear, *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things' *cannot* be recognised as authoritative in virtue of the fact that it has been inferred from prior cognitive states, the particular matters of fact referred to by the propositional contents of which he now knows, thus remembers, to have obtained, i.e., which he has now recognised as authoritative. This is because the propositional content of his belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things' makes no reference to such states, in that it makes no reference to such facts actually obtaining, otherwise it cannot be intelligible for *s*. Moreover, and more importantly, the recognition of the authority of that belief cannot presuppose the authority of the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object, and not in the sense that this would, of course, undermine the actual ultimacy of both. If *s* cannot infer that he *is* a reliable reporter of green things from the prior cognitive states, then the addition of one more such state to his epistemic economy will not tip the balance, even if it is the case that, *having* inferred the fact that he may be a reliable reporter of green things, he *now* infers the presence of a green object. He *still* cannot understand that things *are* green, even if he now believes that something *is* green. The virtue of this fact, even if it is in the end only a *negative virtue*, so to speak, is that it allows the extrication of Sellars's proposed structure of empirical knowledge from the predations of Bonjour's argument. It cannot be that the ultimacy of the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object will be impugned because

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<sup>170</sup> Recall that the subjunctive conditional is one of the things Sellars's allows our mythological, 'Rylean' ancestors in his characterisation of the theoretical introduction of thoughts.

the recognition of the authority of *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things' presupposes its authority.

Nonetheless, how *can s* recognise that he is a reliable reporter of green things? If it is not in virtue of some things actually being green, as would be the case if it presupposed the authority of the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object, then it *must be* in virtue of something about *s* himself. However, if *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things' is to be ultimate, then it cannot be recognised as authoritative in virtue of some other fact about himself. The only other possibility is that it could be recognised as authoritative without having to go beyond its propositional content, i.e., it could be recognised as authoritative via *the rearticulation of its content*.

To understand the suggestion here we must recall that, if *s* is a reliable reporter of green things, then some things must actually be green. That latter is the suppressed, enthymematic portion of the propositional content of *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things'. Now, certainly *s* could *in part* prove his assumption that he is a reliable reporter of green things by *exhibiting* the fact that he can recognise green things, i.e., by pointing them out *now*. This would be illustrative of the fact that, *if s* knows that things are green, *then* he knows how to apply the concept 'green'. And this would involve the rearticulation of the propositional content of *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things'. *S* would have called upon—rearticulated—the suppressed, enthymematic portion of the propositional content of that belief to *show* that he could recognise green things if there are such things. And yet, again, he cannot recognise that he is reliable reporter of green things in virtue of this ability, because he cannot tell that those things he has actually pointed out to be green are green unless he *already* knows that he is a reliable reporter of green things. But this is nonetheless a pregnant suggestion. Moreover, we should note that, in a context in which he has already inferred the presence of a green object the exhibition of this ability is redundant; we shall come back to this important point.

The conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is that *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things' *cannot* be authoritative because it cannot be recognised as authoritative without impugning its ultimacy. Nonetheless, if this means that Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge faces a regress, it is not an aspect of the regress Sellars articulates. This is because, even if *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things' cannot be recognised as authoritative without impugning its ultimacy, this does not *necessarily* impugn the ultimacy of the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object, since the former could never be recognised as authoritative

in virtue of the latter's authority. The point being that it *might still* be possible to recognise that belief as authoritative, *even though* it is *not* ultimate, in virtue of some other instance of general knowledge which *is* both ultimate and authoritative. There *is* a regress which threatens, then, however it is not a diachronic regress of unconditional justification, but *just* a regress of unconditional justification, diachronic only in the reduced sense that inference is a diachronic notion.

#### §6.6. Sellars and the Agrippan Problematic: A Solution

Still, a regress *does* threaten. However, in later reviewing his proposed structure of empirical knowledge from Part VIII of *EPM*, Sellars himself offers a pregnant suggestion as to how this regress might be avoided. He suggests that *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things' may be recognised as authoritative in virtue of the fact that, 'since agency, to be effective, involves having reliable cognitive maps of ourselves and our environment, the concept of effective agency involves that of our' *being* reliable reporters of green things.<sup>171</sup> In other words, Sellars suggests that *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things' is recognisably authoritative in virtue of the fact that 'unless [it is]... likely to be true, the concept of effective agency has no application'.<sup>172</sup> To that end, Sellars argues that that belief that is recognisably authoritative in virtue of *s*'s *further* belief that, to paraphrase Sellars, 'My IPM judgements are likely to be true',<sup>173</sup> where 'IPM' is to be understood to refer to *all* of *s*'s 'introspective, perceptual, and memory judgements',<sup>174</sup> *which must be authoritative*. That is, Sellars's argument is that, if *s*'s IPM judgements are not likely to be true, then he cannot be an epistemic subject.

But this argument fails. The question, of course, is: *how* can *s* recognise that his belief that 'My IPM judgements are likely to be true' is authoritative? Sellars is offering a this-or-nothing justification of its acceptance as authoritative: whilst *s* cannot recognise it *as* authoritative, it must nonetheless *be* authoritative, else he is not, in fact, an epistemic subject. And whilst such a this-or-nothing justification is objectionable in itself, it in any case raises a further problem for Sellars, in that it actually calls into question the very fact that he is using *to shield* that this-or-nothing justification, i.e., that *s* *is* an epistemic subject.

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<sup>171</sup> Wilfrid Sellars, 'More on Givenness and Explanatory Coherence', §82, p. 180, in George S. Pappas (ed.), *Justification and Knowledge*, (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1979), pp. 169—182.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, §83, p. 180.

<sup>173</sup> Paraphrase of *ibid*, §83, p. 180.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, §62, p. 178.

To be more perspicuous, for *s* to be an epistemic subject, then it must be that he thinks. Indeed, it must be that he can *know* that he thinks. Now, *s*'s belief that 'I think' will be the conclusion of an inference to that fact given only a report of 'I think'—this is what Sellars's theoretical introduction of thoughts dictates. But for this to make sense, it must be the case that such an inference leaves no *logical room* for doubt. That is, a necessary requirement on such an outlandish characterisation of how *s* comes to believe that he thinks is that it explain away what is perhaps *the cardinal epistemic fact* to be associated with *s* thinking, i.e., that he *cannot doubt* that he thinks. However, as we have seen, in making the inference to the fact that he thinks, *s* does not understand that he should make that inference, so it may be possible that he *could* come to doubt that he thinks, and that is a problem—something will have gone awry with Sellars's theoretical introduction of thoughts if it cannot safeguard that fact.

But really there is no problem here. For whilst Sellars's theoretical introduction of thoughts *does* allow that *s* can doubt that he thinks—*s* is only reliable, after all, so the inference to the fact that he thinks *could* go wrong—it *does not* allow that he can do anything further with that doubt. To see why this is the case we must note again that, given that *s* does not understand that he should think, and so also, if it were possible, that he *shouldn't* think, any dealings with a doubt of his that he thinks, i.e., his taking it as false that he thinks, will again have to take the conditional form: 'If I do not think, then...'. But that *is* logically impossible, because the propositional content of his doubt cannot be transposed to the antecedent of the conditional *without alteration*, entailing that it must really be understood as 'If I think that I do not think, then...', i.e., if *s* believes—again, takes as true—that he doubts that he thinks. That being the case, the propositional attitudes involved in the very articulation of that antecedent *must cancel each other out*—*s* cannot *both* believe that he doubts that he thinks *and* doubt that he thinks, so no consequent can be broached. The point being that *s* is effectively trying to take two diametrically opposed propositional attitudes to the *same* propositional content at the *same* time, with the end result being *an attitudinal nullity*, so to speak.

Therefore, it is *only* if *s* believes that 'I think' that he can do anything further with that proposition. Thus, given that he *has* done something further with that proposition, it can only be that *s* believes that 'I think'. Nonetheless, whilst that belief will obviously be possibly ultimate and so possibly authoritative, because in believing that he thinks *s* makes it true (the particular matter of fact to which its propositional content refers obtains in his very act of believing it), there is the further question of how *s* can recognise that belief as authoritative.

Sellars's argument then, fully unpacked, is really that *s*'s belief that 'I think' can *only* be recognised as authoritative in virtue of his belief that 'My IPM judgements are likely to be true', which is *why* the latter must itself be authoritative, because, *if s* cannot know that he thinks, *then* he cannot be an epistemic subject. But the problem, of course, is that, as in the case of *s*'s belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects', the propositional content of *s*'s belief that 'My IPM judgement are likely to be true' makes reference, even if only implicitly, to the fact that *s* thinks, since his belief that he thinks will be one of those introspective judgements, and this is exactly what *s* doesn't understand as yet because he has not at this juncture recognised that his belief that 'I think' is authoritative. Therefore, the recognition of the authority of *s*'s belief that 'My IPM judgements are likely to be true' presupposes the authority of *s*'s belief that 'I think', so the latter cannot be authoritative because it cannot be recognised as authoritative without impugning its ultimacy.

To recognise the authority of his belief that 'I think', *s* requires a belief the propositional content of which does not presuppose that he already understands that he *can* think, but which can nonetheless be used to recognise the authority of his belief in that fact. The obvious suggestion is the proposition 'I am a reliable maker of IPM judgements', which, expanded, would read 'If the things referred to by my IPM judgement actually obtain, then I will be a reliable maker of IPM judgements'. But in fact this is indicative of a second problem with Sellars's argument: the proposition 'I am a reliable maker of IPM judgements' *is just not general enough*, and so, in *this* manner, *also* presupposes that *s* already understands that he thinks. The point being that, if 'the concept of effective agency has no application' in virtue of the fact that IPM judgements are *not* likely to be true, then, if we are to make epistemic use of this fact, it can *only* be the case that *s already* understands that the concept of 'effective agency' *has* application, i.e., that *s* understands that he thinks.

We need to ask, therefore, what *enables* the concept of 'effective agency' to have application, and the answer can *only* be that *s* understands the language, *l*, in which his belief that 'I think' is couched. For it is not only paradigmatic of Sellars's appeal to rules of behaviour that, for *s* to understand that he should have inferred something, he will require a whole battery of concepts to enable him to come to understand that he should have inferred that thing, i.e., for him to come to recognise the conclusion of that inference as authoritative, but also paradigmatic of his theoretical introduction of thoughts that they are modelled on overt, intersubjective linguistic acts (see §6.1). That

is, the proposition we are looking for is 'I understand *l*', which, expanded, reads 'If I think, then I understand *l*'.

We have reached the heart of our argument. The Agrippan sceptic's challenge is a bare challenge: 'How do you know?' As we have already noted, at some points this challenge appears unintelligible (see §2.2). One of the points where its intelligibility came into question was in regards to *s*'s belief that 'I think'. However, if *s*'s ability to understand that he thinks requires that he understand a whole battery of other things, even in the limited sense of being able to do things with them, then in fact that question *cannot* be unintelligible when asked in regards to his belief that 'I think'. In such a case it is asking: 'How do you understand that you think?' This is what the recognition of the authority of *s*'s belief that 'I think' must amount to, i.e., it must be a defence of the inference to that conclusion *via* a defence of the fact that he understands that he thinks. The *only* answer, then, to the Agrippan sceptic's question is by *s* asserting that 'I understand *l*'—he understands that he thinks because he understands the language in which that proposition is couched. And the essential thing to notice is that, after such a defence of his inference to the belief that 'I think', the Agrippan sceptic cannot *now* ask *s* how he knows that he understands *l*. At such a juncture that question *really is* unintelligible, for that question *will itself* be couched in *l*. And this is what the recognition of something's authority actually amounts to: *it is an inability to question its dictates because it is authoritative*.

Now, as we have seen, the recognition of the authority of *s*'s non-inferential observational knowledge cannot presuppose the authority of his non-inferential knowledge of general truths in the same way that the recognition of the latter's authority presupposes the authority of the former. But *how* can *s* recognise the authority of his belief that 'I understand *l*' in a context in which no reference is made to the fact that he believes that he thinks? In this case *only* can such a belief be recognised as authoritative without having to go beyond its propositional content, i.e., it can be recognised as authoritative via the rearticulation of its content, and in the following manner. Again, the expanded form of the propositional content of *s*'s belief is 'If I think, then I understand *l*'. In defending his inference to the fact that he thinks, *s* assumes the consequent of this conditional propositional content; in defending his belief in that content itself he assumes the antecedent. That is, *s assumes that he thinks*, and in doing so he exhibits the fact that he understands *l*, because in assuming that he thinks he *actually* thinks, making the propositional content 'I think' true by correctly using the concepts constitutive of that content. But, of course, since his understanding that he



thinks requires that *s* understand a whole battery of other things, even in the limited sense of being able to do things with them, the Agrippan sceptic can then ask how he understands that he thinks. Finally, therefore, having exhibited that he understands *l* by assuming that he thinks, *s* can then infer, *still* without having gone beyond the propositional content of his belief, that he understands *l*. And once again, the Agrippan sceptic cannot ask how *s* knows that he understands *l*, for that question will itself be couched in *l*. So again, if it is unintelligible to ask how he knows it, then the thing which *s* knows must be authoritative.

Up until now we have avoided the question of whether *s*'s belief that 'I understand *l*' can be possibly ultimate. In a negative sense, since it can be recognised as authoritative, and something's ultimacy is the source of its authority, then it must be ultimate for it to be recognisable as such. In a positive sense, we can surely understand it as possibly ultimate in a similar manner to which we argued for *s*'s (rejected) belief that 'Reports of 'This is green' are reliable symptoms of the presence of green objects' possible ultimacy. Let us take stock, then, of the juncture we have reached. We have effectively argued that, since *s* can believe both that 'I think' and that 'I understand *l*' simultaneously, and because they are both possibly ultimate they are possibly authoritative, then, whilst either belief's authority presupposes the authority of the other, since the recognition of either belief's authority does not presuppose the recognition of the authority of the other, they are both ultimate, and so justified by their mere presence in *s*'s epistemic economy. At least in this limit case, it is just not true that the only way a belief can justify another belief is inferentially. But we can say more than this.

We are now in a situation where we *can* make epistemic use of the fact that the concept of 'effective agency' has no application in virtue of the fact that IPM judgements are not likely to be true. For in regards to the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object we can now understand it to be recognisable as authoritative in virtue of *s* reasoning along something like the following lines. After defending his making of that inference by asserting that 'I am a reliable reporter of green things', and so taking himself onto a new justificatory track, *s* can reason to the authority of that belief by then asserting that 'If I am a reliable reporter of green things, then the concept of 'effective agency' must have application'. Therefore, given that we are assuming that it is in fact true that, if *s* is a reliable reporter of green things, then he is able to apply the concept of 'effective agency', we can allow that *s* can infer the consequent of that conditional propositional content, i.e., that the concept of 'effective

agency' *does* have application. So, in defence of that further conclusion *s* will have to show that the concept of 'effective agency' has application, and, of course, he does this by asserting that 'I think', i.e., by showing that the concept of 'effective agency' has application. Finally, therefore, he defends his assertion that he thinks by asserting that 'I understand *l*'. And again the Agrippan sceptic cannot trouble him.

Moreover, we can achieve a similar result strictly in regards to *s*'s belief that 'I am a reliable report of green things' alone. In this case, the inference is simply elided, and the line of reasoning begins with that belief itself, except in its expanded form, i.e., the belief that 'If things can be green, then I am a reliable reporter of green things', and it proceeds by *s* assuming the antecedent, i.e., by *s* exhibiting the fact that he can actually recognise green things by pointing them out, illustrating that he knows how to apply the concept 'green' if things can be green, and so allowing him to infer the consequent, at which point the line of reasoning continues to the end-point already specified.

The structure of empirical knowledge which emerges from these considerations is much as was previously specified, with one rather large exception: it will consist of a privileged stratum of knowledge constituted by both observational knowledge and knowledge of *one* general truth, viz. *s*'s belief that 'I understand *l*'. That latter is the *only* general truth which resides in that privileged stratum. *All* of *s*'s other knowledge of general truths, and specifically those required for him to recognise instances of observational knowledge as authoritative, will be authoritative in virtue of *s*'s belief that 'I understand *l*' being authoritative, *so they cannot be ultimate*.

## Conclusion

The requirements of space dictate that, in lieu of a properly synoptic conclusion, I will instead conclude by drawing out how Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge, amended in the manners which I have proposed, satisfies the morals of the three applications of the Agrippan sceptic's general argumentative methodology over and above the epistemic regress argument, i.e., the evidential regress argument, Bonjour's argument, and the problem of the criterion (although not in that order), and certain further conclusions we can draw from this. I will then highlight a clear problem for Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge, but, importantly, *not* one engendered by the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic. The point being that, even if we *are* to reject Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge in light of this problem, the manner in which it attempts to respond to the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic would seem in any case to be successful, and could perhaps be replicated.

In coming to recognise both his belief that 'I think' and his belief that 'I understand *I*' as authoritative and so justified, in virtue of the fact that he cannot ask himself *how* he knows those things without falling into unintelligibility, I have suggested that *s* comes to understand *that* he both thinks and understands *I*. This can be understood to be signified by a certain dialectical movement, from *s* asking himself how he knows those things to *why* he knows those things. That is, given that, if it is unintelligible for *s* to ask how he knows that he both thinks and understands *I*, then it *must* be the case that he *does* know those things, this does not tell *s* why he knows those things, in the sense of why his thinking *ensures* that he understands *I*, and why his understanding *I* *ensures* that he thinks; nonetheless, the question of why he knows those things assumes that he does know those things.

As we have seen, what is truly unintelligible is for *s* to ask himself how he knows that he understands *I*, as that question is itself couched in *I*. *S*'s belief that 'I understands *I*'—or, extended, his belief that 'If I think, then I understand *I*'—is to be understood as *the criterion* by which *s* comes to recognise that he knows things. The moral of that application of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic which I called 'the problem of the criterion' was that at some point an assumption simply had to be made in regards to the explanation of empirical knowledge (§2.4). *S*'s belief that 'I understand *I*' is clearly that assumption, at least in regards to Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge. But though it is an assumption, I have

illustrated how, made in certain contexts, i.e., in regards to the defence of the inference to *s*'s belief that 'I think' or via the rearticulation of its extended form, it is an *unquestionable* assumption—indeed, a (non-inferentially) justified belief.

Notice that *s*'s belief that 'I understand *l*' is unquestionable in *either* context. This is indicative of the fact that he can come to recognise that he knows that he understands *l* *either* way. That is, it is *not necessary* for *s* to *both* defend his inference to his belief that 'I think' *as well as* rearticulate the extended form of his belief that 'I understand *l*' for him to be justified in believing the latter. This clarifies *how* the authority of each of those beliefs presupposes the authority of the other: the presupposition is a semantic *and so* epistemic presupposition—without either belief *s* cannot recognise that he understands the propositional content of the other, but if he has both beliefs then he can recognise their authority in either context.

Notice that I said that *s* could recognise the authority of *both* his belief that 'I think' *as well as* his belief that 'I understand *l*' in either context. This is, of course, for *s* to move *back* from his recognition of the authority of the latter to the recognition of the authority of the former *because* the latter is authoritative. And here is where the question of why he knows that he understands *l* comes in. The *explanation* for why *s* understands *l* is because he has exhibited his understanding of *l* in believing that 'I think'. Since his believing the proposition 'I think' is his *thinking* the proposition 'I think', he makes that proposition true in believing it, and in so doing shows that he understands what it for something *to be true*.

The moral of that application of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic which I called 'the evidential regress argument' was that we must be able to illustrate that our empirical concepts actually hook onto the mind-independent in some way (§3.2). Moreover, that argument mandates that, to illustrate that our empirical concepts actually hook onto the mind-independent, certainty must occur *at least somewhere* in our structure of knowledge. And it is here, with the recognition of the authority of *s*'s belief that 'I think', in which Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge provides for such certainty. For again, in his believing that 'I think' *s* makes that proposition true, such that its 'chances of being false are nil'. Furthermore, *s*'s belief that 'I think' is not *isolated* in its certainty: we have seen how the recognition of the authority of *any* particular matter of fact *or* general truth is to be funnelled through that belief, via the illustration of the fact that the concept of effective agency has application, i.e., that *s* thinks. Thus its certainty can be understood to suffuse the entirety of *s*'s empirical knowledge.

Which brings us to the moral of that application of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic which I called ‘Bonjour’s argument’. That moral was that we cannot separate the two supposed domains of empirical knowledge—the mind-independent and the mind-dependent—as with a knife, i.e., that introspective and memory knowledge, say, is just as empirical as, e.g., knowledge of mind-independent objects (§3.3). And this is exactly what we find in Sellars’s proposed structure of knowledge. For in an epistemic sense *s*’s knowledge of mind-independent objects is dependent on his introspective knowledge that he thinks for the recognition of its authority, and yet in a semantic sense unless *s* is actually in touch with those mind-independent objects, and in a reliable manner, he could never come to believe that ‘I think’ in any case—the concept of effective agency would have no application.

The story of this thesis *has* been one in which the epistemologist’s reaction to the Agrippan problematic is connected to his theory of concept-acquisition and accompanying semantics (§2.2).<sup>175</sup> The premise of the epistemic regress argument, i.e., the most fundamental application of the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic, is that all justification is inferential. I argued that there were two assumptions underlying this premise, which were, firstly, that the only way a belief can justify another belief is inferentially, and, secondly, that a reason to believe some proposition is always epistemically distinct from belief in the proposition it concerns (§2.1). We have moved from questioning the second assumption underling the premise of the epistemic regress argument with the foundationalist, to questioning neither of those assumptions with the coherentist, to questioning the first of those assumptions with Sellars. We have also moved from an atomistic semantics with the foundationalist, to a holistic semantics with the coherentist, to a holistic semantics with an accompanying tale concerning how we acquire our concepts, *and specifically our mentalistic concepts*, with Sellars.

We have also seen how we can understand the ostensibly paradoxical statement at the heart of the Agrippan problematic, i.e., that we require empirical knowledge to explain empirical knowledge, and yet we cannot assume any empirical knowledge in order to explain empirical knowledge, to be just that—*ostensibly* paradoxical (see the introduction and §2.2). We *must* assume empirical knowledge in order to explain its possibility—*s*’s belief that ‘I understand *l*’ is exactly such an assumption. However, even though it is assumed *it is actually an instance of empirical knowledge*, and can be shown to be such *before* such an explanation begins. That is, the explanation of

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<sup>175</sup> Not his definite semantics, it might now be said, but more like his theory of concepts.

empirical knowledge—the question of why *s* knows what he knows—presupposes that *s* *already* knows certain things, or it could not get started.

Yet there is a clear problem with Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge, and this is *not* that it has no obvious bearing on Cartesian scepticism, although that is also true. It is the problem of *how* the rules of behaviour Sellars's appeals to in order to ensure that the conclusion of the inference to the presence of a green object given only a report of 'This is green' can be meaningful for *s*, even though he does not know why—in virtue of what—it is meaningful for him, *can exist*. For if there is *not* a regress of justification involved in the appeal to such rules, surely there *is* a regress of meaning. That is, how do those others in his linguistic community whom he has internalised the rules of action for a report of 'This is green', such that they can *secondarily* apply them to the behavioural modification of *s* when confronted by green objects in standard conditions of perception, *come by those rules*? If a diachronic regress of language users, each in turn behaviourally conditioning the one whom he comes after, is to be avoided, it can only be that, at some point, Sellars must deal with the fact that linguistic rules would appear to arise from *a world devoid of intentionality*.

However, to conclude, if this is a problem for Sellars, in a certain sense it is just as much a problem for the Agrippan sceptic. For, perhaps unlike the Cartesian sceptic's, the general argumentative methodology of the Agrippan sceptic would seem to be dependent on the possibility of meaning, in that he is doing nothing if his bare challenge 'How do you know?' is just *not* intelligible—we cannot *talk* about anything, let alone knowledge, if meaning is impossible. Indeed, I suspect this is the key to the Agrippan problematic. That is, however it is with Sellars's proposed structure of knowledge, and here we are really concerned with the definite semantics that underlies it, the manner in which to approach the hoped for dissolution of the Agrippan problematic is via the question of how his bare challenge 'How do you know?' *can be so much as intelligible*.

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